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EXCITING NOVELETTE

by

J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

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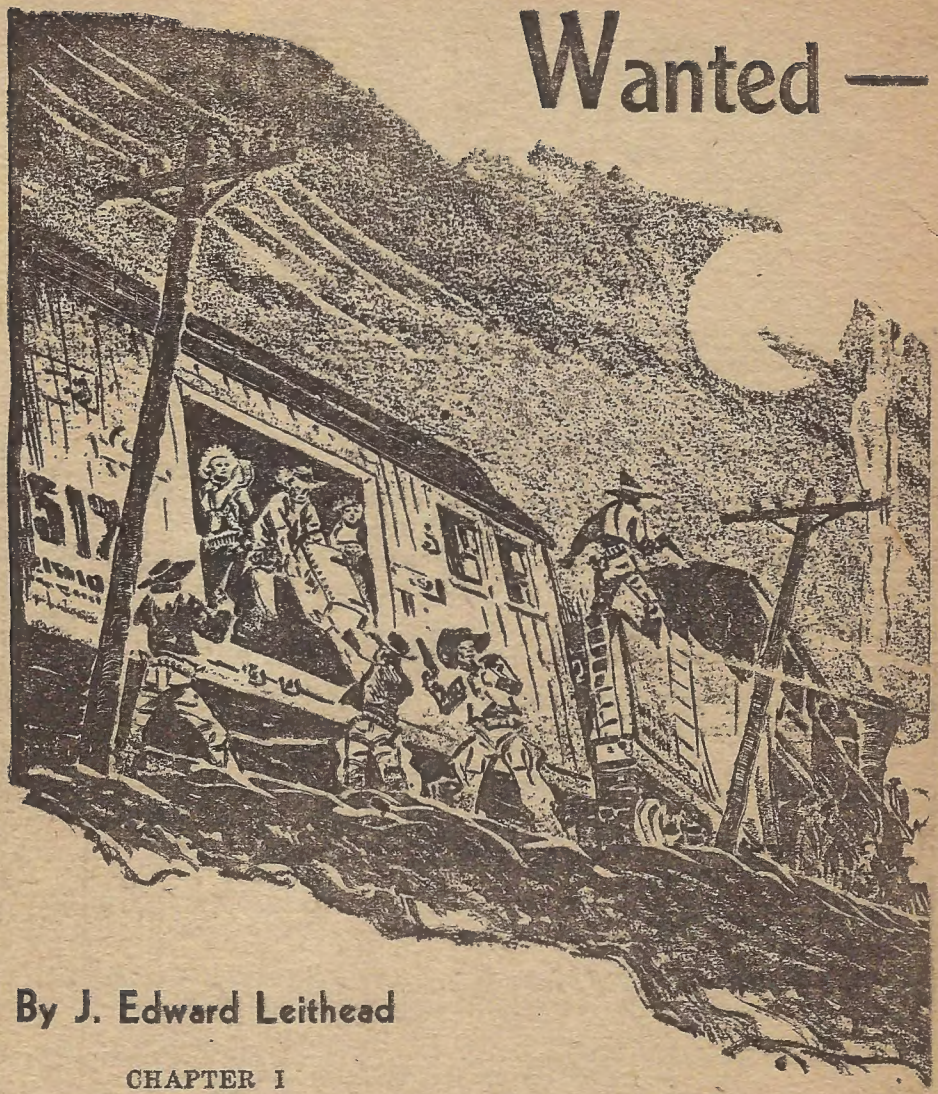


By J. Edward Leithead

CHAPTER I

THERE was a blare of music and a steady tramp of hard-booted feet on Live Oaks' main street. Torches cast a red glow on the sombreroed marchers and those who looked on from the sidewalks. Banners and transparencies urged one and all to vote for Bill Tapley for sheriff. It was a last minute demonstration, early in the evening of election day, by a certain element that wanted another term of Tapley's sheriffing. But the majority of Ajax County's voters knew he had been incompetent or unfaithful.

Standing by the Gaiety Dance Hall and Saloon, Bruce Durand, co-owner of the D Dot ranch with his younger brother, Cal, thought Tapley's backers shewed bad judgment in running him against the other sheriff candidate, Jack McRae. During his term of office, Tapley had never caught any of the rustlers who overran the Rainbolt range. His specialty was arresting drunks. Conditions were worse since the sudden slump in the cattle market. Cowhands were idle, marketable four-year-olds eating their heads off on the range.

The rustlers, finding it impossible to dispose of stolen critters through the usual channels, had turned their attention to stagecoaches and express trains. Jack McRae, in the opinion of many, was the man to stop the crime wave.

Two Outlaw Deputies!

Action-Packed Novelette

Sheriff McRae made the hard-shooting Durand brothers his deputies to help dam Ajax County's owlhoot tide. But when the Durands returned to town ramrodded by a shotgun guard, that rustler dam broke and submerged the star-stymied deputies in a .45 flood.

Bruce Durand's eyelids half closed when he spied Strom Griffin's cream-colored hat among the marchers. Strom owned the Turkey Foot outfit, seemed less affected by market conditions than most Rainbolt ranchmen. It didn't strike Bruce favorably to see Strom parading for Tapley, who had proved himself no crook-catcher.

The tailenders were passing the Gaiety honkytonk and Bruce swung on his heel. He was a well-knit young man, with rugged features, reliable-looking. For half an hour Bruce had lost track of Cal. The latter had been drinking more than he should, and Bruce was a trifle worried, knowing his younger brother's tendency to wild up.

Ear-splitting yells, the pop of guns and pound of hoofs halted Bruce a yard from the Gaiety's wide door. Out of a cross street behind the paraders spurred a band of cowpunchers. Leading the rest, stiff-legged in the stirrups as he cracked away with two guns, came Cal Durand. He was yelling:

"A vote for Tapley's a vote for the owlhooters! Bust up that parade, boys!"

BRUCE sprinted for the hitchrack, pushed in beside his horse and snatched his rope from the tie-straps. Cal was too full of whisky to pay him any heed. There was just one sure way to stop him before he got mixed in a gunplay. The rear guard of marchers had faced about, hands striking gun butts in readiness to repel the charging cowboys.

The elder Durand turned away from the tie-rack, a wide loop spinning in his right hand. Cal didn't recognize him in the half-light, nor was he aware of the lariat snaking out toward him as he galloped by. Bruce set heels into the dirt, snubbing the rope across his hip. Cal was swept from the saddle with a jerk that snapped his head back, cut his yelling and triggering short. Bruce knew there was little danger of his breaking any bones on the hoof-churned ground.

Tossing down the lariat, Bruce grabbed up Cal's .45's, hauled him to unsteady feet and hustled him toward a watering trough. Cal's inebriated companions had run into flashing gunfire and sheered off to the far side of the street, letting drive in reply. The town marshal jumped from the shadows with a shotgun, threatening with a sieving anyone who didn't leather his smoke-pole. He got results.

Bruce was vigorously sousing Cal's head in the watering trough. Cal was inches taller than Bruce, tough and wiry, but he couldn't break away from his elder brother. A melodious voice interrupted the ducking:

"Don't drown the boy, Bruce!"

Bruce held the dripping figure on the side of the trough, to turn gaze upon a dark-eyed girl with white plumes nodding in her headdress. She had thrown a cloak over her bespangled stage costume.

"You see him ridin' to bust up the parade, Adele?" Bruce's lips smiled, but his eyes were still serious. "He might've swallowed a lead pill instead of water."

"'Lo, beautiful!" Cal's mouth widened in a grin. "To my notion, any fellows that want Tapley back in office brand themselves as crooked and ought to be chased off the street."

Adele Spencer smiled at the bedraggled range rider. She was star entertainer at the Gaiety, singing nightly to a packed house, although money was scarce. Far from being the usual dance hall type, for Adele never mingled with the crowd after a performance, she was popular because of her striking beauty and a good voice.

"I guess others hold the same opinion as you, Cal," she said, "but it wouldn't settle anything for you to shoot a Tapley voter or get shot. Let the law take care of the outlaws. I know you're reckless—"

"You're givin' him good advice, Adele," Bruce said, "if he's sober enough to take it in."

"I think the water cure has worked." Adele's finger-tips touched Cal's glistening wet hair. "I was backstage when I heard the shooting and rushed out to see what was up. I go on in a few minutes. You boys coming?"

Her light caress had not escaped Bruce's eye. His lips set firmly. Of late he had felt that Adele was fonder of his brother than of him. She loved the open, and would make a good cowman's wife. If it was Cal she wanted—young Cal, rash but sound of heart—Bruce would step aside. He doubted that she cared anything for Strom Griffin, though the Turkey Foot boss was a persistent admirer.

"Take Cal with you, Adele," said Bruce, returning his brother's six-shooters. "I'll tie his bronc and join you inside. Looks

like the town marshal has the situation in hand up the street."

NEAR midnight, the Durand brothers were among the crowd at the telegraph office, listening to election returns over the wire from every corner of Ajax County. Jack McRae had once served in the Texas Rangers. When there was no longer any doubt of his election and the cheering had subsided, he made a little speech, adding:

"There's just two men I want for deputies, and I see both of 'em here. How about it, you Durands?"

Bruce looked his surprise. Cal, still flushed of face but steady on his feet, laughed, as if he thought McRae was joking.

"I'm serious," declared McRae. "I need at least two reliable, hard shootin' leather whackers, fellows I'm sure ain't mixed up in the crooked work. Oh, yes, I know Cal went a little haywire tonight, but I saw the way Bruce handled him, too. If Bruce can hold his brother in check, no man who voted for me will have any kick about my choice of deputies. What's the answer, boys?"

"Well," smiled Bruce, "we have a lot of time on our hands with range work at a standstill, and we'd like to help along law and order. Cal will keep on his toes—won't you, Cal?"

The younger Durand assured McRae that he would. Besides working for the good of the county, they could use the salaries they'd draw as deputy sheriffs very handily.

"Be on hand tomorrow," Jack McRae told them, "when I take oath."

As they left the telegraph office, Strom Griffin, who had been leaning against the wall, stepped out after the brothers. Disappointed over the election, he had an uneasy feeling that the Durands, more than McRae himself, might prove dangerous to certain of his interests. Strom figured he'd better take concern.

"Wait, boys." Strom oozed friendliness as the pair turned. "I voted for the other side, but since McRae won, I'm behind him—and you fellows, too. The owlhooters have got to be rounded up. With both of you away from the ranch, no tellin' but the rustlers will take advantage of it. It would prevent a possible loss if you'd sell the D Dot herd to me. I've bought cattle from several others, to help 'em over this slump."

"And I'm wonderin' where you get the money to do it!" flared Cal Durand. "If you're on the level, Griffin, you ought to be as near broke as the rest of us."

Strom's smile thinned. "You started in to make trouble once before tonight, Cal. I don't handle dishonest money. Want me to write you a check for the D Dots?"

"Thanks all the same, Strom," said Bruce. "We have a couple of riders to look after the herd. Sheriffin' won't be our steady job."

"Just thought I'd make it easier for you." Strom spread his hands and walked away.

Bruce pulled Cal along the sidewalk.

"That gunhawk's featherin' his nest," growled the younger Durand. "If he buys enough cattle from blind men that can't see through his game, he'll be the only one to profit when the market swings back. Surprisin' he don't just go on rustlin', like you and me always half suspected, instead of buyin' the stuff."

"Strom supported Tapley, Cal, hopin' he'd win, but doubtin' it. Knowin' McRae, once in office, would dig deep, he's been payin' cash for the stock he's gatherin' up on the Turkey Foot, to make it look right. And if he ain't usin' his own money, where does he lose? I'm not certain if Strom thought we'd sell the D Dots or not. But he's made his offer, and if anything happens to 'em, that would seem to clear him of any hand in the rustlin'."

Cal snorted, "He's goin' to lose his stirrups one of these days!"

They passed an old man on a gray horse, driving a burro. The little donkey's pack contained a pick and shovel.

"Desert rat," commented Bruce. "He's travelin' late. Don't often see his kind around here."

LEAVING the Gaiety dance hall at half past one, after telling Adele Spencer of their appointment as deputy sheriffs, Bruce and Cal bent steps toward the Trail Hotel. Both sidewalks were nearly deserted. Across the way, in front of the Red Light Saloon, the old prospector's weary burro lay in the inch-deep dust with its pack on. The gray horse drooped nearby.

The prospector himself stepped through the doorway, smoke curling from a cob pipe. His head jerked suddenly toward a

two-tiered row of empty beer kegs by the saloon wall. His foot shot out, dislodging one of the bottom barrels. The top row tottered and cascaded down. Four gun-waving men scrambled to get clear of the tumbling kegs, which had afforded them concealment, like wolves smoked out of a lair. The prospector had nimbly backed into the saloon.

Across the street, Bruce and Cal had halted, keenly curious and alert. Colt-fire lanced in their direction, bullets bit into the false fronts behind them.

"That means us!" cried Cal, jerking his guns. He would have rushed the spitting Colts, working his triggers, but Bruce, .45 in one hand, wrenched him to his knees with the other.

"You're such a highpockets, Cal, I wonder they missed you! See those barrels rollin' into the street? Do like I do, and make for one!"

Along the block the stores were closed. The open sidewalk was no place to give battle to men who outnumbered them and had retreated to the kegs left standing by the Red Light. At the first volley, the prospector's horse and burro had quit the danger zone. Stooping low, his six-shooter slamming, Bruce scuttled toward a barrel which had rolled to midstreet. Lying flat, he hurled lead wherever he saw a streak of gunflame. A tall man sprang up, throwing a long shadow on the saloon wall, a shadow that quickly shortened as he doubled over a barrel-head.

Cal, jackknifing his long figure in imitation of Bruce, ended his crouching run behind another keg. Bullets thudded hollowly on the empty wooden vessels, which the brothers pushed slowly toward the saloon front, inching themselves along through the dust. A protruding killer's head, rocked by a buzzing slug, dropped from sight.

Bruce's hammer fell with a click as his keg bumped against the raised sidewalk. He reached hurriedly for fresh cartridges. Cal, using his second gun, was slashing fire at the two men cornered in pointblank range. A half-scream, a glimpse of tossing arms, and one was down. No more shots crashed from the scattered casks, nothing moved. Bruce, his six-shooter ready, cautioned the fidgety Cal:

"Careful, one's still there. If he wants to save his skin, he can throw out his gun and stand up."

He got no response from the killer, but caught a faint rattle of spurs. The man was stealing toward the corner of the saloon, to escape down the alley. Bruce raised his head for a better look. A bullet grazed his jaw, the powder blaze showing him exactly where the fleeing killer was. He shot fast, heard the thud of a falling body.

Going from one to another of the stark forms, the Durands couldn't say positively that these men had worked for the Turkey Foot or any other spread, though they'd seen them about town, once or twice on the range.

A cracked voice said, "You boys gave them bushwhackers a dose of the right medicine. I knowed they wasn't up to no good, squeezed down behind them barrels."

Bruce and Cal grinned at the oldster who stood before them, in battered hat and sun-faded shirt, his trousers tucked into cowhide boots.

"Obliged, old-timer," said Bruce. "Sombody didn't want us to be deputy sheriffs. Couldn't even wait till we pinned on badges."

"Lawmen, eh?" the old man cackled. "Lawmen! Well, what d'you know!"

The cause of his mirth wasn't apparent to the Durands.

'Prospectin'?" asked Bruce. "We saw your burro packin' miner's tools. Never heard of any strikes bein' made in this part of Montana. It's all grazin' country."

"It's where you find it, the yellow dust is," the oldster retorted. "Anyway, I'm havin' a look around. My name's Hoddy Bicknell. Help me ketch that bronc and burro of mine, will you?"

CHAPTER II

HODDY BICKNELL reined up in an elbow bend of Whispering Creek. "Seems like it was somewhere about here," he muttered, scratching his head, "though eighteen years is a long time to be away and there's more'n one bend in this here stream. Still, it's as good a place as any to start diggin'."

He unsaddled his horse, slipped the diamond hitch that secured the burro's pack. Taking up the pickax, he stepped off forty paces from the line of the creek and swung his pick. He was shoveling earth from a rudely circular hole, shaking his head over his failure to find what he

sought, when distant hoofbeats made him sink down, grasping his gun.

"It's them Durands," he decided, after a minute's survey of the two horsemen approaching. "I got to quit bein' so jumpy and remember I'm just a grubbin' prospector."

Bruce and Cal, wearing nickel-plated stars, checked rein near the hole in the ground. They were heading for Live Oaks, to take up their duties as lawmen, after turning over the running of the D Dot to the two cowhands they employed.

"Surprised to find you here, Hoddy," said Bruce. "Struck a lead?"

"No color yet," replied Bicknell, "but I thought it looked promisin'. This here your range? You won't chase me off, will you, boys? We'll go halves on anything I take out."

Bruce glanced at Cal, who was grinning broadly. "Why, no, Hoddy, seein' that you gave us a hand the other night. Go on and dig. But I'm tellin' you this ain't gold country."

The Durands rode on. Hoddy, gazing after them, murmured, "Them's right nice boys, and I didn't think I'd ever take to star-badgers."

Riding out of Live Oaks several days later, Bruce and Cal beheld old Hoddy lashing his gray horse down the road to town. His eyes were bugging as he pulled in beside them.

"You're needed on the home range instanter! 'Bout two hours ago, five fellers rode up the creek, drivin' around a hundred D Dots. I dunno where your punchers was at, didn't waste much time lookin' for 'em."

"It's lucky we let you poke around our range, Hoddy," Bruce said grimly, "or the trail might've had time to grow cold. C'mon, Cal, they've only two hours' start!"

The old man accompanied them to point out the cattle tracks a quarter of a mile from his camp on Whispering Creek. From there on his horse couldn't keep up with the deputies' high-lifed broncs. A hundred cattle leave a broad trace in short grass country, and there had been no attempt at trail-blinding by sheering off into the scab-rock when Bruce and Cal struck the stage road above the D Dot holding. The cattle had crossed the road. Superimposed upon the hoofprints was the double track of iron-tired wheels, and Bruce observed.

"Westbound stage went by since the herd crossed here, still goin' north. The Turkey Foot's in that direction. What'd I tell you, Cal, when Strom made us that offer?"

They kicked in the spurs, entered juniper-clad hills north of the stage road. Pounding out a half mile of hoof-scarred trail, Bruce suddenly pulled his mount to its haunches.

"Hear somethin', Cal?"

"Cattle," said his brother, "and close by."

Bruce stepped out of the saddle, handing his reins to Cal. "They're over on the right in some draw or gully. Gang may have seen us comin'."

HE STARTED uptrail on foot, the plaint of cattle growing louder. Rounding the base of a low hill, he drew back quickly in the growth of juniper shrubs at its foot. There was a blind gully around the turn, coming to a dead end against a hillside. Bruce had glimpsed two men in the gully's mouth, smoking as they squatted beside a round-topped boulder. Beyond milled the D Dot cattle.

Evidently the stock thieves hadn't discovered the trailers and holed up to fight. Bruce craned his neck for a longer look. So far as he could tell, there were just two men guarding the cattle. There should have been five, according to Hoddy's report, and the reason for the halt puzzled Bruce. He knew that if he stepped out to get the drop, the two waddies would dive behind that boulder and drill him to doll rags.

Cal was leaning eagerly in the saddle when his brother strode back. "What's the setup?"

Bruce told him. "Seem to be only two waddies, but they could hold that entrance against a dozen. Here's what we'd better do."

Cal was off his horse before Bruce finished. They separated at the foot of the hill flanking the trail, Bruce crouching in the juniper growth. Five, ten minutes passed. He peered around the shoulder of the hill. Cal was worrying along the slope at the gully's upper end. He stopped near the middle, yanked his .45's and his voice floated down:

"Hey, you saddle bums! Trail your spurs and give up to the posse coverin'

the entrance or I'll drop some lead among them spooky critters!"

The instant he began speaking, the rustlers had whisked from sight, between the round-topped boulder and the ravine wall. In this position they had Cal's range, and Bruce couldn't have advanced a foot toward the gully without drawing a deadly fire. A rustler's gun tuned up, and Bruce saw dust spurt from the hillside, close to Cal's head. The younger Durand didn't waste lead trying to shoot around the boulder. He laughed recklessly.

"Keep that up and you'll stampede the bunch yourselves! And your old rock won't be no protection when they jam up goin' through that narrow outlet. Take your choice of gettin' squashed or quittin'!"

The cattle, excited by the booming Colt, were moving like a restless sea, horns cracking, bovine voices rumbling, ready to bolt if there was much more powder blasting in the confined, unfamiliar quarters. Two saddle horses, wise in the ways of range stock, trotted through the outlet. Seeing their mounts escaping, the rustlers arose, arms at full stretch.

"Don't trigger, Durand!" The cry reached Cal on the hillside. "We're headin' out!"

Bruce had stopped the riderless horses, stood in the trail with leveled Colt as the waddies emerged.

"Where's the posse?" asked one, his eyes roving from side to side.

"Cal and me seem to be all the posse that's needed. Drop your belts!"

One waddy complied. The other, as he stripped off his brass-studded belt, slid a hand to the sheathed gun, tilting it up to fire through the bottom of the holster. Bruce had caught the tricky movement. A bullet smacked the rustler between the eyes at the instant he rocked his hammer prong. Bruce was tying the single prisoner when Cal bounded past into the trail.

"One of 'em would have it," Bruce said to his brother, "but this fellow's able to talk, and he will talk if—"

A DISTANT sound like thunder reverberated over the hills. Bruce knew it wasn't a storm coming up in the west, but guns roaring in a skirmish. His glance stabbed the outlaw.

"Stagecoach has been held up and is makin' a fight! That's where your three pals went, ain't it?"

"Yeh," the owlhooter growled.

"Grab his feet, Cal," directed Bruce. "We'll put him where he won't get trampled if our cows leave the gully. Ridin' our spurs, we may be in time to back up the shotgun guard."

A few minutes later they were racing their horses for the stage road. Spurring west up the brush-fringed highway, they heard horsemen coming before they saw them. Three masked riders swept around a bend, two lashing mounts that were visibly lagging. A third balanced an express box across his saddle. At sight of the hard-riding Durands, the trio wrenched their horses off the road, into the heavy brush.

"Ride 'em down," whooped Cal, "before they get set for us!"

Smashing through the thickets on the stage robbers' trail, Bruce and Cal saw one upright figure sway down from the saddle. It looked as though, desperately wounded in the set-to with the shotgun guard, the outlaw had tumbled off into the brush. His companions slowed their pace. It appeared they were going to make a stand, seeing they couldn't outrun the brush-popping lawmen.

There was a scattering of trees between the Durands and the masked riders. Expecting the latter to cut loose the instant the range was right, Bruce and his brother poised weapons for the throwdown as they hammered to close in. Their eyes were on the waiting outlaws, not on the ground, where a thin barrier stretched between saplings thirty feet apart, almost hidden by the undergrowth.

Driving legs struck the knee-high lariat. Both horses tripped, nose-dived in a plunging fall. Hurled a dozen feet or more, Bruce and Cal lit on heads and shoulders. The thud of boots penetrated their foggy minds a second before a slashing gun barrel crushed the hat-crown of each.

Pushing himself up on his hands, Bruce met Cal's bewildered stare. They were alone by the trees, except for a pair of limping horses that didn't belong to them.

"Who," gritted Cal, "hit me after I fell?"

Bruce made a wry face. "The smart hombre we thought was wounded. While his pards held our attention, he sneaked

through the brush and rigged that rope to throw us. It's gone now, and so's our broncs."

Cal, rubbing his head, approached the horses left in place of their own. "They knew we couldn't follow fast on these nags. Been peppered with buckshot. The owlhooters wanted fresh horses for a getaway. Somebody must've been chasin'—"

A rider was coming down the stage road at a pounding pace. Bruce and Cal recognized Bristow, a guard on the stage line. He was turning into the brush even as they hailed him. Bristow was a hard-faced fighting man, looked tougher when he scowled. And he was scowling blackly as he reined up in front of the Durand brothers. His glance touched the bloody-flanked horses, swung back to Bruce and Cal. He threw his shotgun forward, barking:

"A fine pair to be wearin' law badges! Up with your hands!"

CHAPTER III

BRUCE flashed out, "You can't be so plumb crazy as to think we held up the stagecoach, Bristow! You know us—"

"Don't throw talk," the stage guard snapped. "You fellows gave me a tough fight up the road. I s'pose you figured to bluff it out when your horses stalled. Third man ride on with the strongbox?"

In vain Bruce explained how they came to be in their present situation. He couldn't show the guard the rope that had tripped them, and Bristow refused to ride back to the gully where the Durands had found their stolen cattle.

"You're just hopin' your pard will take a crack at me," Bristow declared. "If there'd been any gang but yourselves, they'd 'a' bumped you off. Get up in them saddles and ride ahead of me. Wait, gimme your guns."

Bruce and Cal were not inclined to stubbornness with a shotgun pointing at them. Surrendering their Colts, they swung aboard the injured horses, which made slow progress uptrail to the waiting stagecoach.

Cal wasn't worried. Soon as they struck town, he said, Sheriff Jack McRae would turn them loose. Bruce was less sure, feeling that circumstantial evidence was against them. Prodded into McRae's presence by Bristow's scattergun, the sheriff listened glumly to the tales of both parties. Bristow swore that two of the robbers had been of the same build as Bruce and Cal, and had worn cowboy garb.

"And if you let 'em go because they're your deputies, sheriff," added the shotgun guard, "my company will suspect you're one of the owlhoot gang yourself and take action! We're tired of bein' held up!"

Bristow slammed out and McRae drummed with his fingers on his desk-top. Bruce and Cal, their faces flushed, waited for him to speak.

"I want to believe I wasn't mistaken in you boys," he said at last, "for two good reasons: I like you both and it puts me in a bad light, as you've just witnessed. I'm not sayin' you weren't trailin' stolen stock, but you could've seen the stage go by, and, on the spur of the moment, decided to stick it up. I know you boys need money and maybe deputies' salaries didn't look big enough. I'd say the holdup was Cal's idea, rather than yours, Bruce."

Cal said ruefully, "That's what comes of havin' a wild rep. But I'm no thief, Jack. Look at the bump on my head, where that stage robber gun-whipped me. Bruce has one, too."

"Not such strong evidence in your favor." The sheriff gave him a shadowy smile. "Not near as strong as the evidence against you—bein' found with the horses Bristow wounded. He says the brand on 'em is too faded to make out. Of course, you wouldn't have ridden the horses you usually do. They'd have been a dead giveaway."

Bruce drew a long breath. "Who do you say the third bandit was, the one that got away with the express box?"

"If you're guilty, you can answer that better'n I can, Bruce. Mind, I said, 'If you're guilty.' But I'll have to lock you up for the time bein'. Let me have your badges."

While the Durands sat gloomily in their cell, a half hour later, Sheriff McRae announced a visitor and retired. Adele Spencer, in becoming street attire, hurried down to the cell door McRae pointed out.

"I just heard about you boys," she exclaimed, her face pressed to the wicket, "and I know it isn't true! I told McRae so!"

Bruce smiled. "It sure helps to know we have one friend who hasn't lost faith, Adele."

"I'm ready to prove it," she said. "I have some money saved up—enough, I guess, for bail if it's not too high—"

Adele paused, for Bruce and Cal were shaking their heads.

"We can't let you do that," Bruce said, "though we greatly appreciate your wantin' to."

"Just because I'm a girl, I suppose." Adele looked disappointed. "Men are so absurd sometimes about refusing help from women. I know you're innocent and wouldn't run away, so I'd get my money back, wouldn't I? Please let . . ."

They were grateful, but immovable.

LATE the next day, Bruce and Cal heard a thin, high, excited voice in the sheriff's office. McRae entered the cell room with Hoddy Bicknell and unlocked the door.

"Court order for your release, boys," the sheriff announced. "Bicknell has posted bail for you. The judge set it rather high—five thousand apiece."

The Durands stepped into the corridor, reaching for Hoddy's knotty hands, surprise on their saddle-brown faces.

"Where'd you get so much money all of a sudden?" asked Bruce. "Don't tell us you dug up a pot of gold?"

Hoddy looked at him queerly. "Same thing. A pocket of nuggets. You would tell the old man there wasn't no gold on the Rainbolt range One of your punchers come back from town last night and told me you was both jugged for a stage holdup. I took the nuggets I'd found after you rode off on the rustlers' trail, turned 'em into money this mornin' at a town over east. I got just ten thousand for them."

Cal's eyes were suddenly feverish, his excitement reflected in Bruce's face to a lesser degree. "Why, man, we'll be rollin' in money if—"

"We don't want it to get out awhile yet, Cal," his brother cautioned him, "or everybody will be stampedin' onto our range."

"And don't build your hopes too high," added Hoddy. "We might find some more nuggets and we might not. I've knowed of isolated pockets where there wasn't no other gold in the whole region."

Sheriff McRae's cold stare made Hoddy uncomfortable.

The sheriff said: "Now that you boys have your freedom temporarily, what you aim to do?"

It struck Bruce that McRae wasn't pleased about something. "Pick up the waddies' trail where we left off, Jack, come morning. Our cows are gone from the gully, of course, but if we can find out where they went, we'll have a line on the stage robbers."

The sheriff returned their six-shooters, and, arm in arm with Hoddy Bicknell, the Durands left the jail. The lights were going on all over town when McRae went out to get his supper. Strom Griffin stepped up to him, a sneer on his face.

"Jack, it don't look like you're runnin' the sheriff's office any better than Tapley. I understand those two stickup men of yours were released under heavy bail. Paid in gold by a stranger. Where'd he get it?"

The worried sheriff hesitated. He had his own doubts about that pocket of nuggets. When he spoke, Strom listened without change of countenance, though he had been seized with a fit of avarice.

"You know that Bicknell's lyin', Jack, same as I do!" Strom exclaimed. "He was the third robber. When his pals in crime were caught, he brought in part of the express money—it totaled fifteen thousand, I heard—to 'spring' the Durands, so that all three of 'em could make off with the balance of the loot. Judge Enders must be pretty dumb not to have figured where that bail money came from. Unless you point it out to him and lock up those three bandits, I'll see Enders myself."

"You let me run my business, Strom," the sheriff said, with some heat. "I intended seein' the judge."

Griffin turned away, satisfied the Durands and Bicknell were in trouble up to their necks, and that the express money never would be sought at the Turkey Foot ranch, where it was stored in a safe. If there really was gold on the D Dot—and there must be—he would contrive to benefit by its discovery.

It was eight o'clock when Sheriff McRae encountered Griffin in the doorway of the Gaiety. What the sheriff had to tell him was partly bad news to the Turkey Foot boss, partly good because it seemed

to confirm the fact that Bicknell had made a strike. Hand clapping, whistling and stamping of feet in the hall caused Griffin to turn his head.

"Adele Spencer's just come on," he remarked. "See you later, Jack."

He strolled toward the rows of chairs facing the stage, found a seat near some of his cowboys. Strom noticed Cal Durand at the other end of the row. Adele, as she walked to the center of the stage, seemed to be smiling directly at Cal, and Strom frowned. Even though she knew Cal and his brother were supposed to be implicated in a stage holdup, Adele wasn't giving them the cold shoulder as she always did Strom.

SHERIFF McRAE, spying Bruce Durand at the bar, hastened toward him. "If you'll leave off watchin' Adele a minute," grinned McRae, "I'll spill you some good news."

Bruce flicked an eye at him. "What is it?"

"It looked kind of funny to me," went on McRae, "that Bicknell should discover nuggets, where none's ever been found before, just when bail money was needed to get you fellows out. I've been checkin' up. Judge Enders wasn't able to deposit the ten thousand before the bank closed. He showed it to me. All in gold coins, ten and twenties, every one of 'em dated more'n eighteen years ago.

"I talked to the express agent afterward. He said the stolen money was consigned to a bank in Butte. It was gold and silver, amountin' to fifteen thousand dollars, undoubtedly of more recent mintage than the bail money. That little fact is goin' far toward provin' you boys and Bicknell weren't the bandits. Bicknell must've sold his nuggets to someone who had hoarded them old gold coins."

"They're good, anyway," smiled Bruce, feeling as if a heavy load had been lifted from his shoulders. Then he said, his lips tightening. "But it still leaves the robbers uncaught. If those cow tracks don't peter—"

A six-shooter's roar put a period to his speech and Adele's singing simultaneously. Bruce and the sheriff wheeled toward the stage. Adele, eyes distended, was backing away from the footlights. The Colt, wielded by an inebriated Turkey Foot puncher, blazed again and again, ripping splinters from the stage. He yelled:

"Don't give us no more of them weepy songs, sister! Dance!"

Cal was on his feet, his tall figure towering, one of his guns drawn. He shouted to Adele, "Run! The fool's drunk!" He fired at the cowpuncher, trying to hit his gun arm, but had to aim high for fear the bullet would strike someone else in the audience. There were a dozen men between Cal and the cause of the disturbance. He started to squeeze past them, his face working with rage.

"Griffin," he shouted, suddenly catching sight of the Turkey Foot boss at the other end. "Stop that jigger! He's your man!"

Strom merely glared. Adele's rebuffs had soured him. He didn't care particularly whether one of those slugs accidentally wounded the girl, even killed her. He knew Bruce Durand was somewhere about and that if a free-for-all started, both brothers might be put to sleep in the smoke, removing a menace to Strom's further operations. He spoke guardedly to his cowhands, all of whom were fighting drunk.

"Smoke him up, boys!"

Cal was a sudden target for several six-guns. He squeezed down between leather-clad knees and chair-backs, just in time for the bullets to sweep over him. Adele, uninjured, had sped for the wings. She paused there, as lead ceased to spatter the stage, her eyes dark with dread when she witnessed the attack on Cal. She heard Bruce's fighting yell:

"Twist their tails, Cal, old boy! I'm wadin' in!"

Swinging a gun, he was heading from the bar in long leaps, trailed by Sheriff McRae.

Cal, crouched on the floor, found himself with elbow space to wage a gunfight as the audience fled, knocking over chairs in its eagerness to get out of range. The Turkey Foot men had staggered up, clashing fire at young Durand. Griffin vacated his chair, hand on gun, keeping behind his cowboys. He'd shoot if he saw his chance for a sure killing, but intended his punchers should bear the brunt of the fight.

BULLETS chopped up the floor where Cal knelt, smashed into the tangle of overturned chairs. The puncher who

was the cause of it all, clawed his chest and bent forward, his gun clattering down. Cal had sieved him. A burly Turkey Footer skinned his teeth. It wasn't a grin, but a grimace of pain. Bruce, kicking chairs left and right as he advanced, had caught the burly one in his sights. The cowpuncher's legs turned rubbery, and Bruce's Colt slammed at another smoke-blurred shape.

The powdersmoke thickened, split by red flashes. The sheriff, wishing he had a shotgun, was shouting himself hoarse to no purpose. Old Hoddy Bicknell had been standing near the street door when the fighting broke out. Suddenly, above the Colt clamor, Strom Griffin screamed and slumped to the floor. Nobody saw Hoddy shove smoking pistol in holster and shuffle through the batwings, into the night.

The crumpling of Griffin stilled the six-shooters. He lay on his face, right arm doubled under him. Four blood-stained men crouched in the litter of broken chairs—Bruce and Cal, and two Turkey Foot cowboys. All were staring at Griffin's motionless body. Sheriff McRae walked over and stooped down. There was a bullet hole high in the back of Strom's coat; his gun was leathered. McRae lifted his head, his eyes stern. Either of the Durands could have fired that shot from where he squatted.

'Strom's breathin', but looks like he'll go out. He wasn't in the fight, yet somebody plugged him between the shoulders."

"It was Cal Durand, sheriff!" yammered a Turkey Foot puncher. "I seen him!"

"You're a liar!" Cal roared. "Griffin's as likely to've been hit by a stray bullet as one straight-aimed."

"Not in this case," declared McRae grimly. "It was deliberate, and backshootin's never been in style. Sorry, Cal, but I'll have to rearrest you, along with Griffin's two trouble-prodders."

Bruce switched his gaze from Cal at a sharp little cry from the stage. Adele Spencer stood in the glare of the footlights, distress in every lineament of her face. Cal, violently protesting he hadn't fired the shot, was getting nowhere with the sheriff. Though his brother never had been one to lie, Bruce himself did not feel sure Cal hadn't downed Griffin impulsively. Under the circumstances, it might go hard with Cal—and he was the one Adele loved. Of the last, there was now no doubt in Bruce's mind. He stood up suddenly.

"Sheriff, that Turkey Footer don't see straight. It was me pitched lead into Griffin, not Cal."

His brother turned quickly. "You didn't! Neither of us killed him, though he had it comin'!"

McRae stepped forward, clinking handcuffs, a six-shooter in his other hand. Just when it seemed his deputies were to be cleared of the holdup, they had to get mixed in a gunfight. No doubt he would be severely criticized for appointing them n the first place.

"Well, if you did it, Bruce," McRae said gruffly, "hold out your hands."

Bruce's right hand went out like a striking snake, his Colt barrel cracking down on McRae's gun arm. The sheriff's .45 hit the floor. Bruce backed swiftly toward the door, covering him. The only sounds were the scrape of his boots, the click of high-heeled slippers from the direction of the stage.

As he stepped into the street, Bruce had a momentary view of Adele running across the dance hall. Then he was jumping for the hitchrack, where he and Cal had earlier tied two livery stable horses. They had intended leaving Live Oaks that night, to start trailing the rustled D Dots at daybreak. Without noticing that Hoddy's gray horse was gone from the rack, Bruce lifted his mount to a gallop westward.

CHAPTER IV

BRUCE was nearing the outskirts of town when he heard a horse pounding after him. There was something familiar in the way the single pursuer rode, fanning his mount with his hat at every leap. Bruce pulled up, to let the other overtake him.

"Cal, you darn fool," he exclaimed, "why didn't you stay back there? I cleared you of that killin', and in a few days you'd have been acquitted of robbin' the stage. Then you and Adele—"

Cal snapped, "Keep goin', fellow! I went out the back way. Adele's holdin' up McRae at the front with a .32."

Bruce spurred his horse to match the speed of Cal's.

"Me and Adele, huh?" Cal broke out above the drumming hoofs. "So that's the reason you did it. She likes me, Bruce,

but you rate higher than that. I saw her face Jack McRae with that little gun, to give you time for a getaway, and I know!"

Bruce said nothing, but his heart beat faster. They thundered across the railroad tracks west of town, struck into the moon-silvered sage.

"We're runnin' from somethin' neither of us had a hand in," Cal resumed. "Have I ever shot a man in the back or lied?"

"No. I thought maybe you couldn't resist drillin' him, seein' your chance. Still time for you to turn back."

"Catch me goin'!" Cal scoffed. "I'm with you every jump in the road!"

Bruce threw him an affectionate look. "I'll remind you we're both jumpin' our bail. Old Hoddy will be in a stew."

"He promised us half of anything he dug up," Cal retorted, "so it's partly our own loss. Where we runnin' to?"

"Back to that gully," said Bruce. "If we can get proof Griffin was an owlhooter, I don't know that it would make the law feel any different toward the man who shot him. But that's my aim, if we're not trailed too hard."

Cutting back northeast, as manhunters failed to show up, Bruce and Cal were at the blind gully in the hills before dawn. Daylight revealed cattle tracks leaving the ravine in a northerly direction. About eleven o'clock, three miles from the Turkey Foot ranch, the brothers were startled by hoofbeats on their back trail. They reined into screening brush and dismounted, each keeping a hand on his horse's muzzle. Someone was speaking as the road-jogging horse neared the Durands' covert.

"What you think Strom's chances are for recoverin', Colby?"

Bruce and Cal looked at each other. Swarthy, rawboned Ike Colby was foreman of the Turkey Foot. The party riding by were not possemen, but Griffin cowhands, returning from Live Oaks. Colby's answer was emphatic.

"Strom won't last till sundown, but we don't need him to carry on. There's that little job to be attended to tonight."

When the sound of the cavalcade had faded in the distance, Bruce and Cal straddled the cow trail once more. It ended at the Turkey Foot. From the cover of a timbered ridge, they discovered men branding cattle in a corral, close to ranch headquarters. The range stock numbered about a hundred head, leaving no doubt in the minds of Bruce and Cal that it was the rustled D Dots.

Besides the branding crew, so many men were going in and out of the ranch house, they knew it would be certain death to open a fight for those cattle. Griffin's looked like headquarters for all the longriders in the county. Ike Colby's allusion to a "little job" scheduled for that night had interested the brothers.

WAITING for nightfall and the departure of a raiding party, their horses staked at the foot of the ridge behind them, Bruce and Cal were aroused by the sound of an explosion in the ranch house. Smoke drifted out of an open window. Men converged on the headquarters building from all directions, passed inside.

"Sounds like they're tryin' to blow up the place," Cal said, his eyes glued to the distant house.

Bruce shifted on his side, to grin at his brother. "Payday, if I'm not mistaken. That window's in Griffin's office. Big steel safe there, and he probably didn't trust anyone with the combination. Since Strom's dead or dyin'. Colby's taken over, and just now opened the safe with dynamite to get at that last haul of express money the big boss locked up."

Cal nodded slowly. "Guess you've hit it. Heap expensive to run a big owlhoot spread. Cheaper to be honest."

With the approach of night, seven men headed for the saddle stock corral. Colby was one of them. Easing into saddles, Bruce and his brother trotted away from the Turkey Foot, tailing Colby's party. South, then west beyond Live Oaks, drifted the shadowy riders ahead, the Durands closing up the interval when steel shone in the moonlight and telegraph poles cast long shadows on the sagebrush plain.

A blackjack thicket bordered the right of way at the point where the outlaws stopped. Quitting saddles in this cover, the gang walked on toward the block signal at the trackside.

Bruce and Cal, skirting the blackjack on foot, sank in a small ditch to wait. They wanted prisoners, not dead men, and were depending on the help of express messenger and train crew when the Turkey Foot gang opened the ball.

A locomotive siren wailed and the gleaming eye of a headlight shot out of black space. The outlaws around the semaphore had lowered one movable arm,

raised the other, setting the red light against the oncoming train. Despite the frequent holdups in Ajax County, the hoghead dared not run through a danger signal on the chance that bandits had tampered with the semaphore. As he applied the air, a bandanna-masked man boarded the cab. Five others crunched along the cinder apron to the express car.

The Durands had risen from the ditch. An open stretch of more than a hundred yards lay between them and the rails. The express messenger had refused to open up. Bruce, running his eye over the sinister figures, one on the step of the engine cab, five beside the express car, missed the seventh man.

"They left a horse-holder in the thicket," he warned Cal. "If he sees us—"

The group of five had backed off suddenly from the express car, throwing themselves flat on the ground as a pistol in the hand of one outlaw banged. There was a blinding flash, a deep-toned roar, a sudden blast of air. A stick of dynamite, placed against the car door, had been exploded by the bullet, tearing a great hole.

On the heels of the thunderous report, a .45 tuned up. Cal folded, his Colts going off as he fell. Bruce swiveled, his gun coming up, as Colt flame burst again from the thicket. He sped a bullet where he had seen the horse-holder's gun flash. Followed a thrashing sound in the blackjack, but the harm was done.

KNEELING beside his brother, Bruce hammered lead at the trigger-twitching outlaws. The express messenger poked his gun through the wrecked door. He fired only one shot before a bandit squatting below the aperture answered with a double discharge, silencing the messenger's Colt. Bruce had blasted one man off his feet; a second bandit was reeling.

The outlaw on the step of the cab began shooting at Bruce, who couldn't reply to his fire with three lead-slinging enemies directly in front of him. He was bleeding from flesh wounds; his left shoulder felt numb after a bullet had gouged it. The glare of desperation was in Bruce's eyes as he laid bead on a stooping outlaw. A twanging bullet struck obliquely above his right cheekbone, knocking him sideways across Cal's inert length.

Bruce roused in rumbling darkness, and after a confused moment or two, realized he was aboard a moving train. He got out a box of matches, struck one. Cal lay close by, one side of his face caked with blood. Lighting another match, Bruce discovered a prone figure wearing a visored cap, a few feet from the shattered door. The express messenger was dead, but Cal wasn't. Bruce, working over his brother, finally had him sitting up against the side of the car. The light of understanding was in Cal's eyes when Bruce's last match went out.

"Well, here we are," said Bruce, "and the way safe's gone. We'll be in a worse mess if we're found aboard. Get it, don't you? The Turkey Footers, thinkin' we were dead or nearly so, dumped us in here to make it look like we'd been with the gang, killed the express messenger."

Cal grunted. "Guess the train ain't stopped nowhere since the holdup or we'd be in handcuffs."

"It passed through Live Oaks before the gang flagged 'er, and if this is the Limited, the next stop's over in Rock County. They'll be telegraphin' McRae to hit the trail. I don't feel so spry, and I know you don't, either, but we've got to jump soon as the train slows down."

"It's tough that messenger was killed, Bruce. Say"—Cal felt his holsters in the dark—"I've got both my guns!"

"Sure," replied Bruce, "and I have mine. The Turkey Footers are smart. Wouldn't look like we'd shot it out with the messenger if we had no guns, would it?"

He helped Cal to the splintered opening in the carside where the door had been. The cool night air fanned their faces as they peered out at the dark landscape sliding by.

"Up in the mountains," Bruce remarked. "We're in Rock County now."

About an hour later, the train's speed diminished. The locomotive whistled for a station in prolonged blasts, and Bruce turned to his brother, seated with long legs hanging over the carside.

"Feel you can make it?"

"Yep. Rather break both legs this way than have my neck cracked by a hangnoose."

The engine bell was ringing. Bruce swung off in darkness. He struck the ground loosely, rolled, came to his feet as Cal's flying form hit the cinder apron. Cal rose unaided. With a glance at the night-shrouded buildings up ahead, where

only a station light glowed, the Durands turned away from the cars cracking over the rail joints and descended a steep embankment.

CHAPTER V

SUNRISE found Bruce and Cal loitering on the edge of the town, undecided whether it was safe or not for a couple of horseless strangers to go in. They had washed off the bloodstains at a creek, but the bullet slashes in Bruce's clothing might arouse suspicion when the townfolk learned there had been another holdup and a killing.

Bruce sniffed. "I smell coffee and bacon! Somebody's camped up the road yonder. We've got to take a chance, any way you look at it—so c'mon."

There were a dozen men around the breakfast fire—miners, Bruce judged, by their red shirts and round-crowned hats. On nearer approach, he spied picks and shovels in the packs lying about. Burros grazed with horses nearby.

"Howdy, boys," a whiskered fellow greeted as the Durands stepped up to the fire. "Headin' for the gold camps? Where's your outfit?"

"We had an accident and lost our horses," Bruce replied. "You mean there's been a big strike somewhere? We hadn't heard of it."

The miner's eyes narrowed as he looked them over. "Where you been that you didn't know? It's two weeks now since pay dirt was found up in Longwood Canyon, ten-twelve miles from here. They say there's camps strung up and down the canyon, the richest diggin's ever uncovered in Montana."

The other members of the party were eyeing the Durands suspiciously, probably taking them for mountain outlaws who had lost their horses in a fight. No more questions were asked on either side. Bruce stated they were hungry and food was given them, but the brothers were not invited to go along when the party packed up.

However, there was a more or less steady stream of gold-seekers heading upcountry, some afoot like the Durands, so they fell into line. Nobody heeded their arrival in Longwood Canyon, which had the appearance of a human beehive, for here real desperadoes rubbed elbows with honest men.

"If Hoddy Bicknell hadn't struck gold on the D Dot," Cal said, "I'd feel like stakin' me a piece of ground here."

"He didn't seem very hopeful of findin' any more nuggets," Bruce reminded, "so don't bank on gettin' rich that way. Besides, we have unfinished business in Ajax County. Must be several thousand people here already, more comin' all the time. I wonder what they eat? Not much wild game left and no cattle raised in this county."

An idea had struck Bruce, and later he got in conversation with the proprietor of an eating house, a long shack hastily thrown up on the canyonside. There were dozens of such places to feed the growing population of Longwood Canyon.

"Food's mighty scarce," the proprietor admitted to Bruce, " 'specially beef. We'd pay a good price for any we could get hold of. No limit to the market for cattle in these camps. You fellows work for some outfit?"

"We run one in Ajax County," Bruce told him. "Thousands of good beef cattle over there that ain't sellin' because of a slump in the eastern market. We're stranded without horses—"

The restaurant keeper grabbed his arm excitedly. "I'll get you a couple of horses if you'll go back and start a beef herd this way. Have you had grub? Well, set down and fill up while I'm a-gettin' them broncs."

Bruce and Cal were cautious about returning to Rainbolt range, uncertain of their welcome though they were bearers of news that should solve the cattlemen's problem. Bruce thought they ought to contact the D Dot cowboys or Hoddy Bicknell first. Riding up Whispering Creek toward their ranch, they sighted a group of men in the elbow bend where Hoddy supposedly had unearthed those nuggets.

"What's up?" Bruce exclaimed, reining short. "That's Hoddy on the ground, hogtied. And that galoot pointin' a gun at him is Ike Colby. Let's leave the horses here. Easier to shoot center on your feet."

THEY strode toward the men by the creek bank, hands brushing Colt butts. Besides Colby, there were three other Griffin punchers, all standing with their backs to the Durands. Hoddy, staring into Colby's gun muzzle, didn't observe the approaching pair. The Turkey

Foot cow boss snapped, as Bruce and Cal came within earshot.

"Stop bluffin', Bicknell! The sheriff told Griffin how you got that bail money. You're goin' to tell us where to find more of them nuggets or go under. The Durands are dead—"

"Turn round and see if they are, Colby!"

Bruce's voice must have shocked the crooked cow boss. But he pivoted swiftly, the gun in his hand spitting flame, reaching for the Colt on his left hip. He never got the second gun out of leather, was falling forward as he thumbed hammer. Bruce's slug had pulped his heart. Cal exploded into action as the other three popped out shooting irons. Smoke swirled, pale tongues of fire flashed between the gun-wrangling figures. Two began to sway, broke suddenly at the knees. The third Griffin man moved jerkily toward the creek bank, where horses stood on dropped reins. Cal stopped him.

Bruce sheathed his Colt, ran to Hoddy and untied him. "So they were tryin' to make you give up your gold secret, old-timer? We just—"

"I've been lookin' for you fellers," Hoddy broke in excitedly, "to tell you Strom Griffin didn't die! Too tough to kill. He's up at the Turkey Foot or in Live Oaks this minute, plottin' more skulduggery since he thinks you'n Cal was done up in that train robbery. Colby told me about it, aimin' to shut my mouth with a bullet after I'd showed him where I found the nuggets. The big joke is—there wasn't none!"

Cal had joined Bruce. They both stared at Hoddy. "But that bail money—" began the elder Durand.

Hoddy chuckled. "Before you boys was hardly dry behind the ears, I was a bandit in this country. Hardly any ranches here, then, but stages were runnin'. Just before I was caught and served eighteen years in jail, I cached ten thousand in gold on Whisperin' Creek. Not long since I was let out and come back to get that money, posin' as a prospector so's I could dig round a little, without anybody guessin' what I was lookin' for.

"I wasn't sure of findin' the right spot at once. Finally I struck it. I had aimed to go away and use that cached loot for my old age. But you boys had meantime got in a jackpot, and you'd been good to me. Well, you jumped your bail and the money's lost now. But that was my fault, too."

'How?" asked the astonished Bruce.

"I shot Griffin," replied Hoddy, "never havin' an idea you'd be blamed for it. You'd told me your notion he was leader of all the two-legged wolves round here and your secret enemy. Figured I'd do you a favor by pottin' him. I didn't go for to shoot Strom in the back, but he was dodgin' around so, that's where my bullet went. Then I left."

Bruce laid a hand on the thin shoulder. "Saddle your horse, Hoddy, and go with us to Live Oaks. Got to see McRae right away. Don't let on to anyone about your past or the cached loot. You're our friend, and the D Dot's your home for life."

Swinging into Live Oaks' main street,

Bruce and his companions saw a stagecoach in front of the Gaiety, with a crowd milling around it. Several pieces of baggage were being tossed into the boot by the driver. Of a sudden Bruce spurred his horse and raced for the spot. He had glimpsed Adele Spencer about to step into the stage. She started back, crying, "Bruce!" as he wrenched to a stop, slid off and pushed to her side. He was, for the moment, apparently oblivious to the nearness of Sheriff McRae and Strom Griffin. His jaw was grimly set.

"Where you goin', Adele? Was that your luggage went into the boot?"

"Yes." Her chin lifted. "I'm leaving by Sheriff McRae's order, being deported as an undesirable citizen."

"Did you say that, Jack?" Bruce's stony glance shifted to McRae. "On what grounds?"

"I didn't like to tell her." McRae looked uncomfortable. "But Griffin made such a fuss, sayin' she was a troublemaker, really the cause of you or Cal shootin' him the other night."

Bruce shook his head. "That wasn't it. Griffin couldn't make the grade with Adele, so he tried to revenge himself by havin' her banished from Live Oaks. Well, she's through workin' in the Gaiety anyhow. Driver, throw down Miss Spencer's luggage." He gently clasped Adele's arm. "Please go down the street a ways. I'll join you in a few minutes."

THE girl opened her lips, then closed them, but in her dark-eyed glance he read what she would have said. The crowd parted to let her through. Cal and old Hoddy, sitting saddles behind the stagecoach, were watching a group of Turkey Foot cowhands on the edge of the crowd. Strom Griffin, licking dry lips, spoke for the first time.

"I think the funny business has gone far enough, McRae. Here's the Durands and Bicknell, bold as—"

"Jack," Bruce cut in sharply, "Cal and I are just back from an involuntary trip to Rock County. Did you get word about a train holdup west of Live Oaks? Well, we trailed that gang from the Turkey Foot ranch. There stands the leader of the Ajax County raiders—Strom Griffin!"

There was a stunned silence, then an angry roar from many throats, the mob voice. McRae, grabbing Strom's arm, shot a look at Bruce.

"Help me get him to jail!"

Six-guns tuned up where the Turkey Foot punchers had assembled. They were shooting into the crowd, to create a diversion in their boss's favor. Griffin, twisting out of McRae's grasp as the wildly surging mass carried them down the boardwalk, filled his hand. Bruce, drawing steel, had been thrown against the stage at the curb. He and Griffin fired together. The renegade rancher stumbled, tried to recover, but crashed down, thumbing his hammer. Both his bullets had plowed into the coachside. He moved once, then was still.

The instant Griffin's men opened fire, Cal and Hoddy had gone to work on them from the saddle. The crowd, rallying and dragging out guns, cornered the gang against the front wall of the Gaiety, began cutting them down. It was all over before Bruce could get near enough to shoot.

The sheriff called for a posse to ride up to the Turkey Foot. Bruce waved his arms, shouting:

"Just a minute before you get mounted, men! I saved the good news for the last. Gold's been found in Longwood Canyon, Rock County. It's teemin' with miners, and there's a food shortage. You won't have to wait for the eastern market to rise. Drive your cattle to the gold camps and they'll be bought up at a good price!"

With the joyful yells of the cowmen dinning in his ears, Bruce started back to the stagecoach. Sheriff McRae stopped him.

"Reckon you and Cal will be too busy trail drivin' to wear law badges again, but tell me—which one of you tucked lead into Griffin at the Gaiety? It's been my idea right along you were coverin' up for Cal."

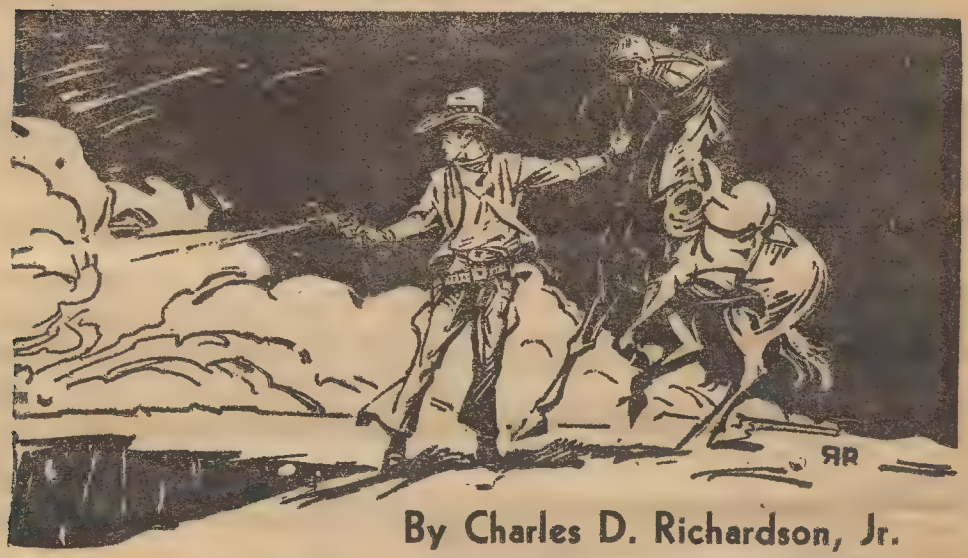
Bruce half smiled. "It wasn't Cal or me. Who it was don't matter now, does it?"

He approached the stage, was about to pick up Adele's luggage, when spurs chinked behind him and Cal's voice spoke softly.

"I'll fetch her traps, fellow. You go on. She's waitin' for you. And she sure picked a right guy."

He gave his brother a gentle push. Bruce, smiling over his shoulder, strode on to where a graceful figure waited in the sun.

Pay Dirt Boomerang



By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

Joe Cranston would stop at nothing to get the dinero to restore his younker's eyesight. But when his plan to stick up the stagecoach blew up in his face, Cranston's own eyes showed him that he couldn't blind the law to a holdup haul.

JOE CRANSTON stared out the window at his small son Buddy and Old Hen Wetherall, etched against the golden bars of early morning sunlight. Old Hen gave the youngster an affectionate pat, then forked his near-by stallion and galloped out over the dewy range.

Buddy walked slowly over to the bench just outside the bunkhouse and sat down.

On the bed where he lay wounded, Joe Cranston squirmed between the sheets. He cursed. It was hell to stay here helpless as a blind bat, unable to ride the range with Old Hen. Blind—the word slashed through Joe's thoughts like a hot brand iron—that's what Buddy Cranston would be, unless a delicate operation were performed within the next few days. An operation which would mean nearly two thousand dollars.

Cranston's highly veined hands clawed the covers into a ball. He turned his head to one side so that he couldn't see his boy out there on the bench. Buddy, Joe knew, even now was having a hard time making out things a few feet in front of him.

The brilliant sunrises, the golden sunsets spilling their hues of silver and red and gold over the rim of the cup which was Ghost Valley, were but an indistinct blur to the child. Buddy Cranston couldn't see the scattered dots of the Leaning T herd. Nor could he make out the bent figure of Old Hen topping the green knoll this side of the twisting stream.

Joe Cranston looked again across the room at his gunbelt hanging on the wall. Within that worn and scored holster lay the means of saving young Buddy's sight. An old .44 single action it was, but with it Joe knew he could stick up the Overman stage which would be hauling over

ten thousand in gold somewhere around noon today.

"I've got to do it," Joe told himself for the tenth time since sunup. And for the tenth time that morning, he tried to get out of bed.

Somehow, Joe finally managed it to the edge of the bed. He sat there several moments, panting. No use kidding himself, he was weak as the devil from that rustler bullet. In spite of the dizzy nausea which gripped him, Cranston's lips pressed in a thin line and the cowman slowly began to slide into his clothing.

What he was about to do was against every principle of square shooting Joe had ever held. Against, too, the ideals and principles of Old Hen Wetherall, his partner. Old Hen hadn't pulled a shady trick in his life. It would cut him deep to think that the man who had married his daughter would stoop to robbing a stage.

Joe Cranston went a little white and he had to stop to get his breath. Joe was thinking of his wife, June, who had died when their son, Buddy, was only two years old. June Wetherall Cranston, Old Hen's raven-haired girl. Joe gulped and drew on his trousers with a shaky hand. He still could hear June's dying words, see the fading light in her eyes as she made Joe promise to bring Buddy up as they had planned, and to look after Old Hen.

She had even smiled at Joe, as her last breath was leaving her.

"Somehow," she'd said ever so faintly, "it doesn't seem hard now—my going out. I know you'll carry on—for the rest of us. Good-by, dear."

WITH cold sweat bathing his forehead, Joe buckled on his gunbelt and saw that the gun was fully loaded and working smoothly. He was sick of lying on his back, letting Old Hen sweat and strain along that way. Things on the Leaning T had gone from bad to worse. A dry summmer, raging forest fires in which Old Hen almost had lost his life, and which had wiped out most of the Leaning T herd and several of Old Hen's valuable horses—all paved the way for the financial ruin toward which the two cowmen were headed.

Then had come the rustler raid to top that. It laid Joe Cranston out and left the aged Hen to carry on alone. Alone, Old Hen must raise that two thousand necessary to save his little grandson's eyesight.

Joe jammed on his hat and staggered out the door.

In order that Buddy wouldn't spot him, the wounded rancher sneaked about the side of the ranch house. Joe's lips twitched at the irony of that. Buddy couldn't see anything until it was almost on top of him. Joe had a hunch that the kid couldn't see as far as he let on. Buddy concealed his thoughts to keep his dad and Old Hen from worrying.

Joe had to steady himself before he pulled up into the saddle. Alternate waves of red and black jumped before him. That wound was worse than he'd figured. Grimly, Cranston took another hold on the saddle horn and swung slowly astride the roan. The sun's rays were searing the spruce tops when he began his long hot ride to the granite cliffs between which the Overman stage would rumble.

As he waited in the pines by the road, Joe Cranston had plenty of time to brood over the thing he was about to undertake. Joe never had robbed a stage in his life. He never had held up anyone, nor gunned a man except in self-defense. Dully, Joe wondered what Old Hen would think of him. He knew Old Hen thought a lot of little Buddy, but Old Hen certainly would be against robbing the stage. He would do all in his power to save Buddy's eyesight the square and honest way.

Joe Cranston lit a quirley to give his trembling lips something to hang on to. There wasn't time to be honest. His boy's sight meant more to Joe than any principle on earth. To hell with the law. He'd gun a dozen men that Buddy might be spared a life of darkness.

Joe stared at the stern cliffs and the winding road. There had been numerous holdups in Brayson County lately and the coach probably would be well guarded. Sheriff "Puma" Stacey—an old pal of Hen's, but a stern stickler for justice—might be around with his posse. Grimly, Joe wondered how many gents he'd have to slug down before he could get the bullion. He wondered how it would feel to see innocent men dropping before him. Men who never had done a thing to him and had all the right in the world to live.

Cranston passed a quivering hand over

his eyes. If only his strength held out. Joe had a horror of the dizziness which still plucked at his brain, making him reel. He gave a quick feel at the bandage on his side and found it still dry. If that wound were to open, the blood begin to flow . . .

The faint sound of hoofbeats made Joe start. The stage! Joe pulled his .44 and eased his horse nearer the edge of trees. The thought of killing and robbing made him sick inside, sick almost as the rustler wound. But always before him was the pathetic face of little Buddy. Buddy who believed implicitly in his father's ability to check the dark horror slowly creeping over him.

Joe tugged his bandanna up over his nose and mouth. He guided his horse out from the trees and galloped rapidly for the approaching stage.

He had covered half the distance when a dark blur streaked out from a chaparral clump, not more than a few yards in front of him. Joe reined in, cursing.

Someone had beat him to it. A squat jasper with mask and cloak of black. He began sticking up the stage before Joe's very eyes. Already, the lanky stage driver had yanked on the brake, the men behind him clawing sky vigorously. The hooded figure, holding two gleaming .45's, sided his horse over and was gesturing for the bullion box.

FINGERS tight about his own gun, Joe Cranston backed his horse into the bushes. What right had this hombre to the loot, anyhow? Probably some gunslick who made a living killing for money. He didn't need that bullion like Joe did. A cunning light jumped into Joe Cranston's eyes. Let the skunk make his steal. He wouldn't get far with it. Joe would follow him to his hideout, get the gold away, if it was the last thing he ever did.

The wound in Joe's side gave another sickening twinge. Again, that black cloud of nausea clawed at Joe's insides. Desperately, the rancher gripped his reins and pounded swiftly through the pines after the retreating bandit. The angry shouts of the men behind became a mere echo in the canyon.

The bandit trail led up a steep path of slippery shale. Joe Cranston, urging his horse along a narrow strip that made his right leg jut into space, stared down at the black pit from which they'd just come and shuddered. That jasper ahead sure must have wanted the shipment badly to come such a way with it. One false step and horse and rider would be a red smear at the bottom.

Sudden lead screaming in his ear brought Joe into a tense crouch over his roan's neck. The hombre had spotted him! Joe mouthed a tight oath and fired instantly. He spurred recklessly on up over the sliding shale. Deep within him was the fear that the gunman might plug him before he could get the gold. Joe thought again of little Buddy sitting patiently at home and wondering what the sunset would look like tonight. Joe roweled deeper.

The rider above Joe topped the rimrock. He slung hasty lead at his pursuer, whisked from sight. Two minutes later, Joe gained the top and streaked across the bare mesa. His bandanna slipped down off his face.

Joe Cranston gave a shout as he made out the speeding form of the bandit over by the towering butte. The fellow was making for the steep side, where the pine and spruce trees thinned. If he kept out in the open like that, Joe might catch him. Joe gave an extra jab to his horse's flank and raised his gun.

It was a long shot and the target moving swiftly, but as Cranston's gun bellowed, the bandit's horse neighed shrilly and ploughed nose-foremost into the pine needles. The rider thudded heavily into some bushes.

The masked gunman swayed to his feet. He had lost one of his .45's in the tumble, but the six-shooter in his right hand moved up in a death arc for Joe Cranston.

"Damn your hide!" the fellow screamed. "You ain't gettin' none of this gold!" Then, as he saw Joe's gaunt face come out of shadow, he shouted, "Joe! Don't shoot! I—"

But Cranston's six-gun already had bucked in thundering detonation. A patch of white appeared on the bandit's black robe, just below the right shoulder. He gave a gurgling cry and folded to the moss. Joe rushed forward, .44 smoking.

The young rancher's face was like chalk. He didn't seem to notice the box of bullion nearby, the gold that now was his and with which he would be able to

save Buddy Cranston's eyesight. Joe went straight to the hooded figure and dropped to its side.

He ripped off the mask.

Cranston didn't say a word as he knelt there, staring at the white features of Old Hen Wetherall. The second time Old Hen had shrieked at him, Joe had recognized the voice, had tried desperately to swing aside his gun. But that damnably quick aim of his had done the trick. Joe had plugged the man he thought more of than any other on earth. The father of the girl who had been his wife for three short, joyous years.

THE agony in Joe's heart dulled the grinding pain in his side. Old Hen, he now realized, had been as worried as he over the hopelessness of ever raising the money for Buddy's operation. Even as Joe, Old Hen must have been planning this stickup for days. He knew that with Joe in bed sick he would have a free hand with the job. Then he'd tell Joe he had "borrowed" the amount. Joe never would suspect Old Hen of robbing the Overman stage.

Joe's trembling hand fluttered to Old Hen's heart. The young cowman gave an involuntary shout. Old Hen still lived! Maybe it wasn't too late after all. Despite returning nausea and excruciating pain beneath his bandage, Cranston pulled off Old Hen's cloak and dragged him over to his horse. Now if he could just get the aged rancher and the gold back to the Leaning T— Joe smiled through his pain and pictured how Buddy would laugh and play again and watch the sunsets. What if Joe himself did die afterwards? Buddy's sight and Old Hen's life were worth it.

Joe had the limp Wetherall on his shoulder now, struggling to hoist the dead weight into the saddle, when snapping twigs and quick shouts brought him to a cold crouch. Joe's .44 jumped into his right hand.

"Hell!" the cowman cursed, lowering Old Hen quickly.

Before him, three gaunt riders were thundering up. Joe couldn't make out their faces in the pine shadows, but he sensed that here was a part of the sheriff's posse out to get him. Like Joe, they had decided to let the hombre take the loot, then trail him to his hideout which might contain other plunder. They must have been hot on the scent, even as Joe was chasing Old Hen.

The trio began to fire on Joe Cranston. Joe's gun coughed. One of the riders lost his Stetson. Another, screaming, clutched at his hip.

"You'll never take Old Hen to jail!" Joe barked hoarsely, firing with inspired aim.

The three riders now crouched behind scant sagebrush. Yellow flame lanced out at Joe; he felt the burn of lead on his shoulder and against his thigh. Warm sweat trickled down his cheek. But he kept up his deadly fire. He must get Old Hen and the bullion to safety, even if it meant shooting up the entire posse. With a sickening wrench at his heart, Joe figured his chances of doing that. If the rest of the posse reached him before he had wiped out these three, he was sunk. He and Old Hen and Buddy's sight.

Joe felt the warm stickiness of fresh blood oozing beneath the bandage on his side. The rustler wound had reopened. Again the nausea, the rending pain. Joe staggered by his horse, gun dropping to the moss. He couldn't hear the exultant shout that went up from the sage clump. He was flat on his face in a pool of his own blood.

Joe battled for what seemed hours in a sea of choking ink. When he finally fought his way to consciousness and some of the throbbing left his head, he opened his eyes to the astounding sight of Old Hen and Sheriff Puma Stacey bending over him. Several of Stacey's possemen were working over three silent forms beneath the jackpines.

Old Hen's bandit mask and cloak lay where Joe had left them.

Joe's first thoughts were of despair. Old Hen and he were caught with the goods. Now Buddy Cranston's chances of regaining his vision were lost forever. Joe and Old Hen would swing for what they had done.

But Sheriff Stacey's rumbling voice soon set Joe clear about that.

"Nerviest thing I ever saw," the lawman was saying. "There was Joe pluggin' down them gunnies as cool as you please, and him just out of a sick bed. By gosh, Hen, it must have surprised you to find Joe had the same idea as you about roundin' up them bandits. Bet you'd have hogtied 'em if you'd of knowed in time."

Beside the sheriff, Old Hen nodded. There was a queer, puzzled look in the rancher's eyes. "Yeah," he said.

Joe Cranston stared, gulped. What the devil did old Puma mean by "bandits" he and Old Hen had rounded up? The men Joe had fought were Stacey's own posse. They—

Joe found himself hanging on to the rest of the sheriff's speech.

"I figured them three hombres," Stacey continued, "wouldn't pass up the chance to stick up the Overman stage, even though they had pulled a bank holdup, killed the cashier just a week ago. They must of had one of their men rob the stage so that we wouldn't be wise they worked both jobs. Anyhow, it shore was a break for you and Joe here. With that four thousand reward for the trio's capture, Joe can save his kid's eyesight and have plenty left over to boot."

For a moment, Joe Cranston lay there on the pine needle bed, breathing hard and trying to digest it all. Those three men he'd just burned down were not a part of the sheriff's posse, but killers who rode the owlhoot and made their living off other gents' pay. Puma Stacey had been trailing them when they had crossed Joe's path. Puma thought Joe and Old Hen had been after *them*.

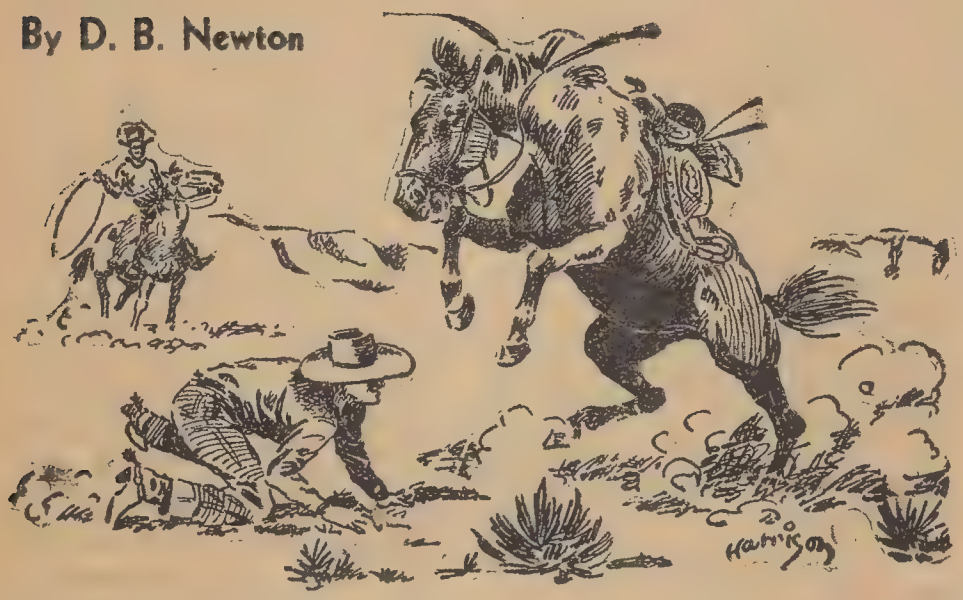
Old Hen gave Joe an affectionate pat. He saw that the wounded rancher's eyes were open. "Everything's okay now, son," Old Hen said softly.

The old fellow went on to explain things, but Joe Cranston's gaze was on the sheriff. Puma Stacey was toying idly with the toe of his boot at the black robe and mask on the ground. Stacey looked at Joe and his right eye moved in a wink, and he grinned a little. Joe grinned back. This foxy old law-dog knew more than he was telling. If he suspected that Joe and Old Hen were connected with the robbery, he didn't let on. Those three killers were headed for the noose anyway. Joe had saved Puma a lot of trouble.

Joe Cranston closed his eyes with a sigh. Somehow, before him, he could see the beautiful face of his wife, June, and she was smiling. She, too, would be happy that her little boy would see the sunsets again. Somehow, Joe felt that June would be near when they operated. She and Joe and Old Hen would watch over Buddy as the gray film was being lifted.

Powdersmoke Recruit

By D. B. Newton



When his father was trampled to death by maverick hoofs, the Stoddard kid had to ride a man's trail. But before he could stomp out that mad-hoofs legacy, the button had to ride down the secret of Question Mark Ranch.

THE Stoddard kid saw the whole thing from his perch on the corral's top pole. The horror that swept him was like a physical illness. Afterwards he dropped down to the earth, moving mechanically, unable to tear his eyes from that awful spot that was partly hidden now by the thick swirl of yellow dust.

By this time men were breaking free of the first shock; their yells split the morning air as they threw open the gate or came scrambling in over the sides of the big pen. Quickly someone had a rope spinning. He dabbed it over the sweating neck of the black horse. The animal shrilled badly, careening, pummeling the earth with reddened hoofs.

Russ Owens left the others to that business and came running to the place where Terry Stoddard stood rooted, back pressed against the rails. The tall man's homely face was grim and white. He took Terry by both tense shoulders and turned him quickly, so he couldn't look at what lay there in the corral. Then the boy went to pieces.

Big Russ soothed him, awkwardly. "Go right ahead, fella," he muttered. "Have it out!" He called to one of the Question Mark cowhands.

"I'm takin' Terry up to the big house. This ain't any place for him."

He didn't try to talk as he led the youngster away from the corral.

Up at the house, Frank Moore was waiting on the deep veranda, his bright-haired daughter beside him. The old rancher's kindly eyes asked a question as

Owens and the boy came up the broad steps.

"It's his daddy," Russ said. "An accident—"

Horror in his face, Moore tried to take Terry from Russ; but the boy broke away from both of them. Running to a couch in front of the big window, he threw himself at full length, sobbing. Jean Moore hurried after him.

Russ said to Frank, "Some fool talked Dave into ridin' the black this morning. The damn killer hoss threw the saddle and trampled him."

"Dead?"

The cowboy nodded. "You better keep the kid up here. Dave's not a good sight to look at."

Frank Moore shook his greying head, dragging furiously at the cigar in his set mouth. "Better arrange the buryin' this afternoon," he said gruffly, to hide his feeling. "We'll put him up there on the knoll where he used to like to go and set. There's nothing more we can do for him."

"And Terry?"

"We'll see," the Question Mark owner said. "All right, Owens, that'll be all. And would you tell Brett Rankin I want to see him?"

A frown came into Russ Owens' eyes at the name, but Moore had turned away and didn't see it. Russ shrugged and went back to the excited crowd at the corral.

FRANK MOORE found Jean sitting beside Terry on the couch, talking to him; but the boy had his face buried in the cushions and refused to be comforted. Sh got up and the rancher took his daughter's place, put a blue-veined hand awkwardly on the lad's shoulder.

"Look here," he growled, trying to soften his voice. "You keep this up, some of the boys are gonna see you and think you still know how to cry."

"I don't care!" Terry Stoddard's voice came muffled through his sobs. "Don't care what they think!"

Moore frowned, with a quick look up at his daughter's anxious face. He tried again. "Reckon I couldn't blame you," he admitted.

"Still, you wouldn't have wanted your daddy to know he failed, would you? He's had a mighty hard time of it, without your mother alive to help him bring you up. We all figured he'd done a fine job of it. And we thought he'd raised you to be the kind of a man that could take just this sort of thing on the chin, when it came. Maybe we were wrong. And your daddy, too."

The boy's sobs had ceased suddenly. Frank knew he was listening. The rancher went on:

"There's another reason you got to get hold of yourself. I'm gonna have to make one of the other boys foreman, to take your dad's place. That's gonna leave the Question Mark short-handed. Don't you see it's up to you now to make a hand? You've growed up today, Terry. You ain't the Stoddard kid any more. From this day on you're gonna be Terrence Stoddard, with a man's name and a man's job on your shoulders. Let's see how well you can handle both of them."

Terry sat up, knuckling the last of the tears out of his big brown eyes. His trembling lips were set firm. He swallowed and said, "Y-yes, sir."

"Atta boy!" Frank stood up, thrust out an aging hand. "From now on you draw Question Mark wages. And your name goes in the paybook. I'm glad to have you ridin' for this outfit, Stoddard."

Terry thrust his small paw into Frank Moore's grip, even managed to grin back at him a little. Then Frank turned away. The touch of his daughter's hand on his arm brought their glances together for an instant. She didn't need words to tell him what she thought of her dad at this moment. The tears brimming in her worshiping eyes were enough. He smiled down at her, patted her fingers on his arm.

Then he had to go to meet Brett Rankin, who was just coming up the steps.

Rankin nodded briefly, touched his hat brim. "Owens said you wanted me," he grunted.

"Yes." Frank Moore was studying the other, sizing him up in a new light. There was something about Brett Rankin he had never exactly liked, yet Brett was undoubtedly the best man he had riding for him. A little hard maybe. Still, Rankin's brand of hard efficiency might be the very thing Moore would need in this emergency.

He said, "You savvy how we stand, of course, with Dave Stoddard gone. I'm too old to get around much, myself. Whoever is foreman of the Question Mark has the big job here—and it *is* a big job. Even

Dave was losing ground in the face of the losses we've sustained."

Rankin nodded. "Yeah." His mouth twisted drily. "I've had my own ideas about this rustlin' siege all along. And I think I can get results. You won't be makin' any mistake, boss, puttin' me in Stoddard's place."

A frown clouded Moore's seamed brow at Rankin's cockiness. But aggressiveness wasn't a bad trait in any leader. He said:

"All right, Brett, I'll give you a try. From now on the boys will be told they take their orders from you. And it's your responsibility to keep the Question Mark running smoothly. I wish you luck."

THEY dug Dave Stoddard's grave where Frank said, up on the evergreen knoll above the ranch house. It seemed as though Dave would have liked that better than the cemetery in Red Rock, with strangers all around him.

After the ceremony was over, Terry remained longer than the others. Russ Owens didn't think he should, but Jean Moore came and spoke to Russ, quietly.

"It won't do any harm," she told him. "Let him stay alone here with his dad awhile, if he wants to."

And Russ nodded silent agreement. There was more between this man and woman than mere words could express. They rode back to the ranch together, side by side, her bright beauty set against his dark, lean strength. And much passed between them, in that hour, though not a dozen sentences were spoken.

Terry came in a long time later, when sunset had flamed and faded out again, and shadows were already creeping from the hollow places of the earth. He spoke to no one. His face was a set, white mask as he mechanically went about turning his pony loose, carrying the saddle his dad had given him into the saddle shed, and hanging up the blanket and bridle.

There was a two-roomed house at the Question Mark where Dave and Terry had been living for the last five years—ever since Dave had gone to work as Frank Moore's foreman. It had been home to Terry for so long that now, as he shoved open the door and entered, he stopped dead on the threshold in numbed surprise at what he saw there.

Brett Rankin was seated at the table in the front room. Lud Gleason and a couple of his other cohorts were there too. They had a bottle and glasses. The floor was strewn with cigarette butts. They looked as though they belonged.

Terry could only stand and stare at them, the shock of the thing struggling to register through the cloak of his grief. Neither he nor his dad had ever liked Rankin much. He didn't know much about these others, except that they were among the newer Question Mark hands, and that Lud Gleason was pretty good at throwing a knife into targets on a board. He couldn't savvy what business they had here.

They were looking at him as he stood motionless in the doorway. Brett Rankin was scowling. He said darkly, "Well?"

"What are you doin' here?" the boy demanded. "This is my dad's house."

Rankin grinned crookedly. "It *was*, you mean," he said. "It goes with the job. I'm foreman now. You'll have to find some place else to bed down. I'm takin' over."

Blind fury swept through Terry Stoddard and knotted his hands into fists. "We'll see about that!" he flared. "You got no right to my dad's house. You and these bums you hang out with will make a pigsty out of it. You already spilled whisky all over the table, and—"

"That's enough!" A little unsteady with drink, Rankin came toward him around the table. "Now, you get out!"

"No!"

"Get out!" Rankin took him by the shoulder, opened the door with his other hand, and shoved him roughly through. The boy tripped and would have fallen if someone outside hadn't caught him and steadied him.

It was Russ Owens. The big man looked at him and at Brett Rankin. His face was dark with anger. "What's goin' on?" he demanded.

Terry tried to tell him, but the new foreman cut him off. "Take that kid away from here, before I haul off and let him have one. The damn punk—"

A SOLID blow from Owens' right fist connected with Rankin's jaw and stretched him out on the door sill. "That's for pickin' on the youngster, when you know what happened this morning," Russ said tightly. "Even you ought to have more decency in you than that!"

The blow had knocked all the liquor fumes out of Rankin's head. He sat up, spat blood, his eyes slitted and mean. Then he used both hands on the door case-

ment to jerk himself to his feet and drive his body forward at Owens.

A flailing fist got Russ on the side of the head and he stumbled back off the shallow porch. Brett Rankin followed in, fists pumping. He closed an eye for Owens with one lucky punch.

The big man caught his footing again and met Rankin's charge with a one-two that jolted his thick frame. They stood toe to toe in the dust slugging it out, while the dusk grew deeper around them. Men were running to see the fight. Lud Gleason and Rankin's other two friends came sidling out of the little house, ugly expressions on their faces as though they'd like to take a hand.

Terry Stoddard watched them uneasily, because he wasn't sure how drunk they might be. He couldn't help remembering the way Lud Gleason's knife could sink into a slab of soft wood, or any other target he chose to throw it at.

Suddenly Brett Rankin was down. He got to his feet, and again Russ Owens crumpled him up. This time he stayed in the dust where Russ had put him.

The latter stood over him, not even breathing hard, his lean frame bent forward a little. Then he looked up at Rankin's friends and his right hand slid down, suggestively, toward the old leather holster that carried a rubber-butted six-shooter against his thigh. But Gleason and the others just looked back at him sullenly, and kept clear of their own weapons.

Rankin sat up, feeling his jaw with one hand. His hate-filled eyes focused on Owens. "All right," he growled. "That settles it. You're fired!"

"The hell I am!" the other retorted. "I made up my mind to quit this outfit when first I heard you were gonna be foreman. I don't reckon I'd be very happy takin' orders from you."

"That's for sure!" muttered Rankin. "I'd see to it." He got to his feet, a little unsteadily.

"What's all this?"

Old Frank Moore had come down from the big house, Jean with him. The Question Mark hands made way for them. Frank quickly got the facts from Owens and his new foreman. The rancher's expression was puzzled and unhappy.

"It's a damn shame to end a day like this with a fight," he said. "It wouldn't have happened if Rankin hadn't had a drink too many. As for the house, I reckon that does belong to Brett, now. It's always gone with the foreman job. But, Terry, I don't think you'd want to stay down here all by yourself anyway. You'd get pretty lonesome.

"I'll tell you what," he added on inspiration. "There's an empty room up at the house. Why don't you come and stay there with Jean and me for the time being?"

"No." Terry spoke a little curtly, although he knew Frank was trying to be kind. "You said I was on the payroll now, just like the other men. I reckon I can make my bed with 'em, down at the bunkhouse."

"All right, Terry," the old man said. "That's up to you."

"Come on." Russ put his arm around the youngster's shoulders. "You can have my bunk. I'm quittin'."

They had gone several paces before Jean Moore caught up with them. Her hair was a bright sheen in the growing darkness, her face hardly visible.

"Quitting?" she echoed. "Oh no, Russ!"

He faced her in the dusk, one arm still around Terry's shoulders. "I've already told your dad," he said. "He agreed it was best. Brett will make a good foreman, but the two of us could never get along that way. It's not just this thing tonight. Rankin's always had it in for me—I think you know why."

Jean knew. Only a year ago the range had prophesied a lot of things about Brett Rankin and Frank Moore's daughter. Then Russ Owens had come into the picture, and all that had been changed. Jean knew Brett had never forgiven the newer man for spoiling his chances; but she, in the middle, could only follow her heart and regret her part as the cause of that rivalry.

She said, "What will you do, Russ?"

"My job here at the Question Mark was about finished anyway," he told her. "I've got most of the money I need. My spread up in the Wineglass hills is pretty nearly at the stage to start taking all of my time. I'll just go up there and work doubly hard now putting on the finishing touches. Getting things in shape."

He didn't need to say any more. They both knew what was to come when that little place of his was ready. It was all part of their common plans.

"And now, fella," Russ told Terry as

they left her and went on together to the bunkhouse. "Let's get you fixed up with a place to bed down."

SO RUSS OWENS left the Question Mark, and Terry Stoddard took up his new life as a full-fledged hand. Being young, the death of his father couldn't long repress his natural spirits. Yet he wasn't happy. Where he had been the son of the foreman, a great favorite with the boys, maybe a little spoiled by them, now, with Brett Rankin in control, there had come a subtle difference. Brett's crowd of friends were in the ascendancy. They all seemed to take a particular pleasure in adding a little misery, when they could, to the lot of Dave Stoddard's boy. They'd never liked Dave.

There were other things. Finally, after about a week of it, Terry went to see his boss. Old Frank sat down with him and listened carefully, just as though Terry were one of the regular men with a real, grown-up complaint.

"I don't really care if Mr. Rankin don't like me," Terry finished. "I guess after all I'm just a kid to him and not worth foolin' with. But I sure wish I could have a chance to show what I can do. I never get any real jobs, Mr. Moore. I just bring in the cavvy at daybreak, then do silly little things all day long like mendin' harness and rustlin' firewood and water for the cook. Seems to me I'm in a rut."

Frank dragged at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger, thinking. He couldn't tell the boy that he'd ordered Rankin to give him light, easy tasks that he was sure Terry could handle. Instead, he said slowly: "All of us start at the bottom, Stoddard. Remember, the things you do are all mighty important. The boys have to have their horses; the cook—"

"Oh, sure," Terry said fretfully. "I know all that."

"And you're right," Frank agreed, quickly. "I've had my eye on you, Stoddard; you're going to make a hand. Now that you've shown you can do the small jobs, I had about decided myself you ought to get some advancement.

"I'll tell you what. Here's a real, responsible chore that someone's got to do. It's yours if you're interested. Every afternoon," he went on, seeing the boy's sudden attention, "we need somebody to go into Red Rock to pick up the mail for the ranch. Every once in a while, you know, there's apt to be money in it, so the job calls for a mighty careful hombre who'll risk his neck if he has to, to protect what he's carryin'. Are you game?"

Terry's glance narrowed a trifle, his enthusiasm ebbing. This sounded a lot like another of those water-and-firewood chores. He knew there wasn't any danger connected with carrying what little mail the Question Mark took in. Who'd stick anyone up for a couple of seed catalogues and a handful of circulars?

Still, it gave him a chance to get away from the ranch and actually do a little riding. Terry nodded. "All right, Mr. Moore," he said.

Next afternoon, he saddled his pony and struck out for town on his first trip. He was early, because he intended to take a long detour through the Wineglass hills to look up his friend Russ Owens. Russ had promised Terry a job, whenever he got his new ranch paying; Terry was eager to get away from the Question Mark.

He thought a lot of the Moores, of course, but as for Rankin and his pals—Last night he'd sneaked up to an open window and watched them carousing in the little house he still thought of as his father's. There had been empty bottles stacked on all the furniture, and the place was filthy. He hadn't fallen asleep for a long time thinking about it.

The ground grew rough underfoot, as his pony worked into the foothills of the Wineglass. He was on Russ Owens' range now, though still quite a way from the flat where Russ had built his house and his windmill, and put in his alfalfa. This shortcut he took now was in a region little traveled and unfamiliar to Terry.

Suddenly he reined in sharply.

Just ahead, his brown eyes had caught sight of the shadowed opening of a small box canyon. Rimmed in steep rock, it was only a narrow cut where the wind rattled drily in heavy growth of scrub juniper and sage. A sturdy pole fence and gate had been set across that slot. Penned up within the carefully hidden corral thus formed a herd of maybe sixty cattle milled. They all had the Question Mark burn on them.

Terry rode up to it cautiously, sat staring. Everything he'd ever heard about rustlers on this range came back to him in a rush. And many other things, that made a great jumble to swirl without

meaning in his head. He passed a hand over his brow, wondered if the sun were too much for him. But always he had to come back to this one cold fact: a hidden canyon, filled with Question Mark cattle—on Russ Owens' range.

AFTER a long time he kicked his pony's flanks with dull spurs and rode on. He was past all thinking now. But there was a sick feeling in his stomach and his fingers were cold as they held the reins. Before he quite realized it, he had ridden into Owens' yard. Russ, who was hoeing a truck garden out behind the new three-room house, came around to see him with a grin on his face.

"How you doin', fella?" Russ greeted him. "Light down."

"Haven't got time." For a long minute Terry could only sit looking at him. Finally he said, in a strange voice:

"Comin' in, I rid past a box canyon over south a ways, on your range."

His friend's smile vanished all at once, to be replaced by a look that might mean bewilderment or might mean something else. "Yeah?"

Eyes intent on the other's face, Terry asked, slowly, "Know what was in it?"

With the same look, Russ hesitated, shook his head. "No."

"You don't, huh?" Suddenly, Terry jerked his pony around and sent him pounding away. He heard Russ calling after him, but didn't stop. Strange, hot tears were in his eyes, blurring the bright afternoon.

At the top of a hill he pulled up, looked back, and saw Russ Owens springing into saddle and hurrying off toward the south. To Terry, it looked as though he were headed straight for that hidden canyon!

The boy turned and rode on in misery.

At Red Rock, Terry had to wait a long time to pick up the mail he had come for. Then he went resolutely to the sheriff's office, at the jail.

The deputy, a lanky, red-faced man named Sid Peters, looked him over and said briefly, "Ben Lunt ain't in. What d'ya want him for?"

"Somethin' I'll have to tell the sheriff," Terry said. "I'll wait."

But waiting did something to his firm intentions. How long he sat there in the musty office he hardly knew. Shadows came out of the corners and spread across the floor. Through the window Terry could see the dust that hung in the town's still air turn bright under the touch of sunset.

Sid Peters came in again and found him. "Good gravy!" the deputy snorted. "You still here, kid? I'm gunna have to run you home in a minute. Whyn't you tell me what you want the sheriff for?"

Terry came out of his thoughts with a start. "I—I've changed my mind," the boy said slowly, his voice sounding far away. Wearily he got to his feet. "Guess I didn't have anything to tell him after all—"

Peters was looking out the door. "Well, he's comin' right now. And Brett Rankin and that hombre Gleason. They was in early this afternoon and got him; said they had something for him to look at, out in the Wineglass hills. Looks like they brought back a prisoner."

In quick apprehension, Terry joined him. Through the sunlit dust Rankin, Gleason, and the sheriff were heading for the jail. And they had Russ Owens, handcuffed, with them.

IT WAS eleven that night when, heart pounding, Terry stole quietly out of the bunkhouse. His pony was in the corral. He fetched his stuff from the saddle room and, working swiftly and in the constant fear of waking someone, got the animal saddled and led it into the shadows behind Brett Rankin's house.

He had debated this move for hours, in tortured solitude. He had heard all the arguments. He'd heard Rankin boast about finding the cattle in that hidden corral on Owens' range—just an hour or two before Terry's discovery of it, apparently.

Rankin was saying now that Russ Owens was probably responsible for all the rustling that had been going on, getting the money that way to build up his own spread. He had a grudge against Frank Moore, didn't he? Just because Frank made Rankin foreman, and not himself, Owens had picked a fight with his successful rival, then walked off, quitting his job.

Terry knew there was something wrong with that story, but he was past rational analysis himself. His own mind was made up when he talked to Jean. She was sure, in her own quiet, strange way, that it was all a mistake; that what they said of Russ was not true. Though Terry

couldn't go that far—he still had to believe his own eyes, didn't he?—nevertheless he thought a lot of Jean. Russ Owens was his best friend.

No, there wasn't anything else he could do, he figured, as he tied his pony in the shadows and crept up toward the little house. In an old chest of drawers on the back porch was his dad's old six-shooter and a box of shells. He'd swiped it more than once to go rabbit hunting. He was going to get them now and break Russ Owens out of the Red Rock jail.

Rankin and his friends were having another party tonight; more boisterous than ever, it seemed to Terry. Probably celebrating Russ Owens' arrest. The noise they made covered Terry's progress as he crept up the back steps, avoided a board that creaked and knelt to ease open the drawer. He pocketed the box of shells, took out the empty gun—

"Hell no, it ain't gonna slip up!" That sudden outburst came from Rankin so plainly that Terry, on the porch, could hear every word. "We got Owens sewed up ten ways to Sunday, ain't we? Not even he's guessed who planted those steers on him. He couldn't prove nothing if he did."

"I dunno," came Gleason's voice, as Terry hung breathless, stunned, on these amazing and terrible words. "You're goin' pretty far, Brett. First it was Dave Stoddard—"

"We had to get rid of him, you fool! He was guessin' too much about the Question Mark's disappearin' cattle. Besides, with him gone and me in his job, I've got a freer hand. Put Owens out of the way, now, and it won't take the girl long to forget him and be back eatin' out of my hand. She brings the Question Mark with her, when the old man's through. It all follows, one step after another. But Stoddard had to go first."

"Still and all," Lud Gleason hesitated. "Murder!"

"And have you heard anybody even suggest that saddle leather was cut, when the black threw him? Forget it! The whole business is closed!"

Terry had heard enough. Brett Rankin's ranting voice had put such icy tremors through his young body that he could hardly stand erect when he pushed himself to his feet. But he knew suddenly that he had to get out of there! What if Rankin should discover he had heard?

He turned, shakily, toward the back steps. A heavy box that had been moved out from the wall where it used to belong connected with his shins. The boy lost balance, tripped, went down the steps.

At once he scrambled up, but running feet were shaking the little house. The back door wrenched open. Silhouetted there, Rankin looked out and saw him full in the light of the rising moon.

Terry turned and ran. He heard Brett Rankin's hoarse bellow, "He was spyin' on us! *Get him!*"

The foreman and three others were piling through the door now and coming after him, spreading out to head him off.

THE boy had started for the big house, a haven inviting him if he could make its protection. Then he saw that one of the men was heading so as to cut him off before he could get there. He recognized the man—Lud Gleason. They wouldn't dare shoot him—not with the ranch sleeping around them—but Gleason's knife would make no sound.

There was only one way open. Terry went that way, with their heavy footfalls sounding after him. He reached the pony, vaulted to its back, thanked his stars he could build a knot that would come loose with a jerk at the reins. Then he had the pony's nose turned toward the open, and kicked its flanks with his heels.

He could hear their curses behind him as he started away. They all had horses saddled in front of the house, he knew. Those broncs could run faster than his little pony, once they got going. This was no respite. Poor Terry dug in the spurs and hung on, watched the treacherous ground slide underfoot.

He hit the road and turned into it, making better time here. He was heading for Red Rock. It wasn't very far, and surely there he would be safe. But now a drum of hoofs reached his ears. Looking back he saw a knot of horsemen break into the road far behind and come after him. They were gaining.

The frightened boy remembered the gun in his hand; but it was empty. He put the reins in his teeth, fumbled in his pocket and brought out the box of shells. As the horse galloped he tried to load the weapon. But a hoof striking in a deep rut jolted him and the box spilled, all the bright cartridges spattering into the dust of the road.

He just hung on and rode then.

At long last, with his pony faltering on the last of its wind, a dark blot on the plain with a few scattered lights showed ahead. Terry sobbed a prayer at sight of that. He looked back. His pursuers were still far enough behind. Maybe they'd give up when they hit the edge of town.

But, no, as the first house loomed near and flashed away behind they still came pounding on. Terry began to wonder if there was any safety, in all the night. These houses were so dark, so unfriendly—

Then he saw the jail with a light in it. A prayer of thanks filled him. He plunged his exhausted pony to a halt before it, fell out of the saddle, ducked under the hitch rack and up to the heavy door of the sheriff's office. It was locked!

Terry pounded on it with the butt of his useless gun, yelled, "Let me in! Hey, sheriff!"

For an interminable moment there was no sound. Then abruptly the door swung open. The deputy gaped down outside now.

"What the hell—"

With a shrug, he started to push the door shut again in the boy's terrified face when Brett Rankin and the others came and came shooting.

The first bullet slapped into the casing of the door, a little high, inches from Peters' face. He dived away from the door. Terry managed to push it open and get inside the building. Opposite he caught a glimpse of big Russ Owens gripping the bars of his cell door and yelling something at him.

More lead slapped in through the open door. Rankin and the others were right outside now.

Then Terry heard Russ Owens' shouting voice, as it finally penetrated to his brain. "Your gun, fella! Gimme your gun!"

Terry glanced at it, remembered it was empty. But the deputy's revolver lay on the floor where he'd dropped it. Terry Stoddard fumbled with it, tried to pick it up and couldn't. So he simply skittered it across the floor into Russ Owens' cell. Russ palmed it.

Hell broke loose, then. Russ Owens' only chance against the four of them was that Rankin and his men, not expecting trouble, were crowding through the door when he opened up. Wedged there, they made a good target and interfered with each other's fire.

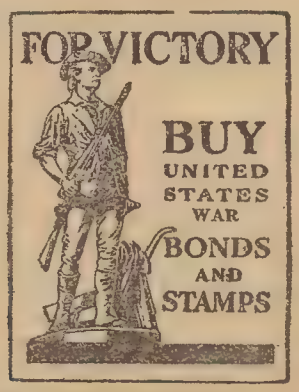
Gleason was the first to go down. His body slumped back against Rankin. The foreman cursed and shoved him aside, his own gun cracking down and blazing. Terry saw Russ stumble, knew in horror that the lead had struck him somewhere. But Russ, jaw set, put his weight against the bars and steadied his hand, pulled trigger again and again.

And suddenly the last shot smashed to echoes, and the guns in the door were silenced. The strength ran out of Russ Owens. He sort of slumped down against the bars and sat there grinning weakly at Terry. The boy coughed on powdersmoke, grinned back, his eyes like black holes burned in his face.

"Okay, fella?" said Russ.

"Okay," Terry managed.

. . . And folks came yelling in, and found them like that—the future partners of the Wineglass hills.



Here We Go to Tokyo!

A Tenderfoot Gets Tough

For years Joshua Wetherstone had dreamed of being a rootin', tootin' cowboy with all the trappings. But Joshua was doomed for a rude awakening in the sagebrush country. For the hornswoggling of a high-boot buckaroo turned his dreams into a gunsmoke nightmare.

By Stuart Friedman

HE WAS a small, drab figure when he entered Pantala's General Store. When he emerged he was as splendid and faintly ridiculous as a totem pole. From Stetson to boots Joshua Wetherstone dazzled. He let his thin fingers trail over the ornate walnut handle of the new six-gun, his sallow cheeks pink with the excitement of the new country, the new life.

As he moved in the direction of the railroad station the gaudy array of conchas on his flaring batwings splashed the light of the blistering sun against the gray boardwalk and building fronts. Gleaming roweled spurs gave him the look of an oversized drunken bird, progressing with wobbly caution on unfamiliar high heels. Joshua peered in the empty station, saw that his bulky canvas bag was still there, then turned back up the street.

He began to blink rapidly and his face got that tight, pinched look. What had happened to Tom Thess? Tom's letter had said he'd meet the train, and the train had been in more than an hour. What if Tom backed out? What would happen to him, Joshua?

"Damn!" Joshua exploded. "You dern fool, Joshua Wetherstone. Stop rilin' yourself up, and quit that infernal blinkin' your eyes. Scared of your own shadow!"

Resolutely, he made himself relax, then filled his lungs with the hot, dry air. He had crossed the continent for the chance to *live*, and he wasn't going to carry the chains of his own fretful, worrisome disposition any longer. The deadening years back East, hunched on a high stool and entering precise, cramped figures in other men's ledgers, was of the past.

For five years Joshua Wetherstone had denied himself all pleasures but his dreams of this awesomely beautiful land. And he had been willing to live on three dollars a week. Now he had more than fifteen hundred dollars. Tom Thess, who had a great ranch near Chichiki Landing, was going to sell him an interest.

JOSHUA walked slowly along the dusty street, taking a childlike pleasure in dirtying the spanking new boots. He had a tremendous urge to break in the Stetson the way he'd heard they did in the longhorn country, but the thought of wadding and trampling such a wonderful hat was appalling.

Few people would see him. Most of Pantala's citizenry was where Joshua himself wanted to be. Down by the tracks, corralled cattle were being loaded into the stockcars for shipment. The tramping, bawling din of it magnetized Joshua. But he had to wait so as not to miss Tom Thess.

Joshua's head lifted quickly as a pair of riders appeared at the end of the street ahead. He watched admiringly, his eyes beginning to blink unconsciously, as the pair rode their ponies to the hitching rail.

They dismounted and swung toward the Quien Sabe saloon with such fluid grace, it seemed to Joshua, they might have been birds. He was going to learn to ride like that, and walk like that so his rowels sang, and his chaps and holstered gun flapped in that spanking kind of rhythm. Joshua ached with a longing for the sort of confidence a man must have to swing along like those high-boot buckaroos.

Joshua walked up close to the nearest cow pony. A pinto, he thought. The animal gave him a skitterish look. His ears and nostrils flickered, then apparently sized him up as harmless. Joshua extended his hand gingerly, patted the warm, smooth neck. His hand jerked back as though blistered.

"A hoss thief!"

One of the buckaroos thrust out of the swinging saloon door, vaulted the hitching rail and landed with a clump before Joshua. He was a head taller and half again as broad as Joshua. His eyes were a startlingly scoured blue, vivid against his wind and sun leathered dark face. The bigger man suppressed a sudden quirking at one corner of his wide mouth.

"I wasn't going to steal your horse," Joshua said earnestly. "I was just looking." He waited painfully, but the big man's blue eyes probed him in silence. "I'm waiting for Tom Thess. Maybe you know him. From over Chichiki Landing way."

Joshua stopped and drew in his breath slowly, miserably unable to stop the frenzied blinking of his eyes.

"Draw your iron, shorthorn!"

Joshua's hands moved agitatedly. "You're wrong. I told you—" His voice trailed off as the other man reached for his gun. His mouth pinched in the grim effort to face things the way he wanted to. Not begging. Not sniveling. He had worked too hard to become a part of this land to shame himself. Joshua reached for his gun. Never in his life had he fired a gun. Maybe he shouldn't have been carrying it. Maybe . . .

There was a clatter of hoofs. Joshua shot a quick look down the street.

"It's Tom," he shouted. "Tom Thess! He's come. He'll tell you about me. Anyway you got to wait. We'll have—have the shoot-out. But you got to wait. I come

clean across the country to meet him. My friend—"

"Why, you sandy little varmint. I only hankered to know if you was as big as your britches," the blue-eyed man said, laughing uproariously. He stretched out his hand. Joshua shook hands numbly. "I'm Ace Lord, foreman of the Boxed QZ outfit." He waggled a thumb over one shoulder. "I'm going back in the Kinsavvy. Bring your pardner in— I'm buying. What was the name?"

"Joshua," he said. "Joshua Wetherstone."

TOM THESS dismounted slowly, watched Ace Lord disappear through the swinging doors of the Quien Sabe. Joshua hurried around back of the other horses, came up to Tom Thess.

"Tom, I'm so dern glad to see you!"

"Wetherstone," Thess acknowledged with a short nod. "We got to high-tail for Chichiki Landing."

"Trouble?" Joshua asked quickly. He met Tom Thess's frown with a foolish look, realized he'd made the word sound like something delicious.

"Trouble," Thess repeated. "Which ain't the name of a game. In these parts it's called the Boxed QZ."

"Then that fellow—that Ace Lord—"

"A bottom-dealing, killing polecat!" Thess said. He scrutinized Joshua. "You got your money?"

Joshua patted his waist. "Got it in a belt next to my hide." He grinned down at his ornate chaps and boots. "Like my outfit? Not like me to go hog-wild. It was a tussle to put out more on one outfit than I spent for duds in ten years. But I feel like I was just born new. Guess you understand me better than anybody, though. I wasn't too dern crazy-headed, was I, Tom?"

"No. No," Thess said abstractedly. "We'll get your things and head for the outfit. I'll spread my sougan over Blackie's rump here," he said, patting the big black horse. "You can ride back of me. He won't notice your weight."

"Ride back of you?" The indignity nearly choked him. "I'll buy me a horse, Tom. Dern it—"

"Plenty mounts in the remuda without spending like money was sand. We got more to think about than looking purty."

"Looks like you could of trailed one over for me," Joshua said. "Or I could of taken the stage over to Chichiki Landing. Only your letter said not to."

Thess looked at him squarely. "Already you know more about my business than me. Maybe I better give another think about letting you in—"

"You know best, Tom," Joshua said hastily. "I was just talking crazy. You don't know how much I appreciate the chance you're giving me."

There was a dull, unaccountable heaviness in him as the headed out of Pantala. Joshua supposed it was because Thess wasn't the spirited, hearty-voiced man he remembered. Of course Joshua had known him only a week, and that five years ago. Thess had been on a business trip lining up Eastern markets. But they had become instant friends. Thess's glowing accounts of the great cattle country had lifted, inspired Joshua.

Thess had been willing from the very first to let Joshua buy an interest in his great ranch. Of course he hadn't had a stake at that time. But he had written Thess, told him of his plan to save. It was not often that an important man like Tom Thess even noticed Joshua Wetherstone.

Joshua cherished that friendship, built it in his mind, kept it alive through letters, leaned on it as something fine. He relied on Tom Thess as the very essence of strength, something Joshua felt lacking in himself.

But now—even the way the big man sagged in the heavy stock saddle suggested defeat. And Joshua had noticed the buoyancy of his face had been replaced by down-slanting lines from his mouth and eyes. Under the dusty black sombrero Tom's eyes had had a muddy cast. A thread of peevish tension ran through his voice. His troubles must be great.

IT WAS nearly sunset when they reached the house, a rackety jumble of unpainted boards rearing out of tangled mesquite. Joshua slid to the ground, writhed the kinks out of his body. The place was little better than a wickiup, and as well as he could figure, right about the center of nowhere.

Directly ahead, Lower Chichiki Range rose like a jagged spine against the sunset, no nearer than it had been four hot hours ago. In almost any direction sheer-walled buttes, themselves like isolated mountains, towered over the landscape,

their western faces brilliant yellow, red and purple.

"Line camp," Thess said, dismounting. "We need grub, and it's quite a way to the big house. Besides I keep papers and contracts out here since the trouble, and we can get our business tended to now."

Joshua slapped his sombrero against his leg, wiped a sleeve across his sweaty forehead.

"Sounds good, Tom," he said. "Fact, you sound more spirited-like. Whilst you was in your mood I didn't want to bother. But now we're going to be pardners—or part pardners—what's the trouble you been hinting?"

"Ace Lord and his boss and their string of gun waddies have been rustlin'. Can't prove it, but it's common knowledge in Chichiki country."

"Rustlers!" Joshua said, eyes widening. He slapped his holstered six-gun. "First thing I'm learning is to handle this here Colt. Dern it, I hate thieves, Tom. I want your word, Tom, that you'll not keep me back just because I'm a greenhorn. I want to be right alongside the men when the showdown comes."

Thess reached out, slipped Joshua's gun from the holster. "Good weapon," he said, nodding. He turned, led the way to the line camp shelter house.

Joshua followed, eyes blinking rapidly, his fingers probing for the money belt under his shirt.

"Here it is," he said, inside. He tossed the belt on the plank-top, squat table.

Tom Thess stuck Joshua's gun under his belt, reached for the money belt on the table. Joshua watched him count out the bills, nodding, and moistening his dry lips every few seconds. At last he looked up.

"I'll get the papers."

"Not between you and me, Tom," Joshua said. "Your word and your hand is plenty."

Joshua felt his throat crowding so full he couldn't say any more. At last he belonged. He could see from the brightening of Tom's face, his sudden smile, that any doubts about him were gone.

Joshua frowned and bent suddenly. He pointed toward the window at Thess's back.

"Those your men, Tom?"

Thess whirled. He studied the window-framed view of the three mounted men, ant size in the distance and against the base of a butte.

"No. They're Boxed QZ riders. They're coming down into my brush! This is the baldest-faced yet! Not even waiting for night!" Thess said savagely, yanking the brim of his black sombrero. He faced Joshua, his mouth a white-rimmed straight slash. "This time we catch them. I'm riding for help. You'll have to stay. But keep out of their way. They're killers, Wetherstone. You can hide in the brush."

Joshua opened his mouth to say something. He didn't know what. Certainly they couldn't both ride the big black and make any speed. He ran out after Thess as the heavy man swung into the saddle.

"Tom—wait—the gun. You better leave me my gun just in case— Tom!"

But Thess had yanked the reins. The big black reared and wheeled. In a split second he had plunged into the high brush. Thess, bent low, hatbrim yanked down against the scratching branches of mesquite, didn't hear Joshua.

THE sound of crackling brush came back more and more faintly, until finally it was gone. Joshua stood motionless, alone, a little man in a big hat. He stared numbly toward the riders coming in the opposite direction, his empty stomach dancing with vicious jabs of pan.

The riders would soon leave the slightly higher cactus-patch sandy clearing they were crossing. Once they entered the mesquite he wouldn't be able to see them. They'd find him. This was their country and they were mounted and armed.

Joshua sat down suddenly and tugged off his boots. Then he pulled down his hat, tied the thongs under his chin. He started off through the brush in the general direction Tom Thess had gone. He walked fast, boots jammed under one arm, his sallow face screwed up solemnly —and almost lost under the hat.

After fifteen minutes he was sweating liberally and puffing from the pace he set himself. His face was scratched and his left arm numb from clenching the boots so tightly against his meatless ribs. From time to time he glanced back, his eyes blinking uncontrollably. He made little effort to trail Tom's horse. He headed as straight as he knew how directly west toward Lower Chichiki Range, ignoring the punishment to his stockinged feet.

Then he heard a vague soughing sound somewhere backtrail. He stopped, listened intently. The sound clarified till he could pick out the individual fragments—thumping . . . crackling. It was the riders, coming through the brush. The sound swelled with each slam of Joshua's heart.

They weren't turning or stopping and they were killers—Tom had said so. Maybe they'd spotted him. His breath locked in his throat. He saw them now, moving blurs through the curtaining of branch and leaf.

Joshua plunged into a wiry thicket, squirmed his way down and under till he lay flat and scarcely breathing. They came on. It was like listening to the threatening grumble of thunder and waiting for the inevitable shattering crack of lightning, but a damn sight more personal.

Then, miraculously, the riders were past. Joshua crawled out of hiding, muttering like a chased rooster. He'd have hated them less if they'd put a few bullets in his hide. To send a man digging like a prairie dog was worse than—than—sitting his life out on a bookkeeper's stool—almost. . . .

The sun had gone hours ago. More stars than Joshua had ever seen glinted from the clean low sky. A bright moon kept his shadow in front of him, made a strange misty pattern of the mountain range ahead.

Joshua was free of the mesquite, walking on upsloping grasslands. But though he had seen small herds of longhorns to the north and south there was nothing to the west between him and Chichiki Range. Neither house nor riders nor town. There was the faint trace of a trail through the grass, and he was following that.

Tom Thess hadn't returned.

Joshua came to a sudden swelling of the land. As he climbed it, the slow fire in his leg muscles leaped agonizingly. He sighed as he made the ridgetop, then caught his breath in amazement. The land fell sharply away. At the base of the slope lights glowed from the windows of scores of houses and buildings.

It was a town. At its edge was a river that wove a diagonal silver thread across the long broad valley. The Chichiki? The town would be Chichiki Landing. Someone there would guide him to Tom's ranch.

The path led into the main street and the first building was the Longhorn Saloon. Joshua flinched under the impact of fiddle and guitar music fighting the boisterous din of thumping boots and shrill voices. But he entered, walking like a fly in glue.

Every step was agony, because his feet were bruised and cut and swollen too large for the narrow boots. He scanned the line of men, ranged solidly along the bar, most of them facing the lively dance floor. His eyes met, locked with Ace Lord's.

THE Boxed QZ foreman frowned, then grinned. "Joshua Wetherstone! Where you been, little feller? You run out on that drink," Ace Lord said, laughing. "Looks like you need one now. Come on. Name it."

"I am Tom Thess's partner, Mister Lord," Joshua said coldly. "I'm looking for him right now—and nothing better have happened to him. Maybe one of you men can tell me the way to Thess's ranch," Joshua continued, ignoring Ace Lord.

"Thess's ranch?" the man next to Ace Lord asked, glancing at Ace. "You ever hear of it?"

"Nope," Ace said, blue eyes narrowing on Joshua. "You look powerful upset, little feller. What's this Thess's brand—?"

"I—I don't know," Joshua faltered. His face puckered then, angrily. "Dern it. I had enough of your jokes!"

He turned, headed painfully toward the door. He'd ought to've had more gumption than to talk to that rustler. Joshua turned along the board walk outside, and became aware of Ace Lord at his side.

"Listen, little feller," he said seriously. "Onliest Thess I know hangs out down at Big Red's. Pecos Bill Thess."

"Name's Tom," Joshua said edgily.

"Might be him. 'Pecos Bill's' just a handle for any blowhard tinhorn."

"My friend is Tom Thess, the same one you seen ride into Pantala this noon. We're partners," Joshua said. "I don't need your company or your jokes."

"I didn't get a look-see at the feller in Pantala," Ace said. "But I'm trailin' with you. You're tuckered out, and don't know it. I got me a notion you're swimmin' too deep for a shorthorn."

Joshua stopped, faced him squarely. "You might as well know it. Tom already told me about you and your outfit. You want to see to it I don't get to talk to anybody. Something's happened to Tom, I can see that. You're trying to cover up," Joshua said desperately. "I got no gun now so you daren't shoot me, and I won't move another step, so—"

"Tom told you about *me* and *my* outfit?" Ace demanded. "What? That it's the best outfit hereabouts?"

"No," Joshua said. "Listen. I got to find him—I got to. Let's don't stand jawin'. Every cent I got—"

"Money! You mean you give this tinhorn money? The Thess I know is a tinhorn. If you give him money you're loco!" Ace said. "We both got business with him now, so come along. I'm powerful anxious to know what he said about me."

Tom Thess wasn't in Big Red's Saloon. Joshua hobbled after Ace Lord across to the two-story hotel where Pecos Bill Thess lived. Joshua listened to the exchange of words between Ace and the owner, then followed up the stairs into the narrow, dim-lighted hall. He felt all his weariness and hunger acutely now. He couldn't bring himself to speak, and fright showed plainly in his eyes.

Ace kicked open the door without ceremony, snicked a match alight in the dark room, touched flame to the wick of an oil lamp.

"We'll wait," Ace said, scanning bed, chest and straight chairs. "How much he get?"

"Fifteen hundred," Joshua said.

Ace pulled out the top drawer of the chest, scuffed through it with a big hand. Joshua stared at the contents. Piles of string-bound letters. One trembling hand went unerringly to a bundle in his handwriting.

"I wonder," Joshua said slowly, "what the rest of these letters say. I think—"

"One way to find out," Ace said patly.

FIVE minutes later Ace said, "I'm going for the sheriff. No reckonin' how many fellers like you he's thieved from, and likely killed afterwards."

Joshua moved in a void, numb, unaware of the noise or the crowd around him as he pushed up to the bar of Big Red's saloon. He took a whisky in one gulp, let it fire through him. Tom Thess—a crook. A confidence man. Joshua Wetherstone's great friend—a thief.

Of course, Joshua realized, he had begged to be hornswoggled. He hadn't been smart enough to understand, five years ago, that big ranchers didn't sell out little dribbles to little people like Joshua. Now that Joshua remembered, Thess had offered him an interest almost as soon as he knew him.

By following it up, writing Thess, Joshua had given him an irresistible opportunity. And he'd probably given Thess the idea for getting other dupes through letters. As he remembered, it was strange about Thess insisting Joshua wait in Pantala—and not arrive in Chichiki Landing. Thess had taken his gun, too. He had never meant him to get to this town at all, and provide a connection between them.

Thess had lied about Ace Lord probably to make out that Ace was a crook and a liar in case Joshua had discussed his deal with Thess. Joshua ordered another whisky, his thin shoulders hunching. If those Boxed QZ riders hadn't happened along Thess would have killed him.

"Listen, saddle bum, don't you go ordering me around for a second drink. Pay up for the first one!"

Joshua blinked amazedly at the threatening face of the bartender. He fumblingly felt his pockets.

"Why I haven't got any money."

The bartender sputtered, ducked and headed for the endgate. He came out and around front of the bar, grabbed Joshua's arm. He hustled him down the bar, toward the back, to an appreciative audience.

"Want the boss to have a look at fancy-britches," the bull-voiced man announced to the crowd. "Don't step up like a gent and ask for free drinks. Demands *two* drinks. Then, just like he was an angel bestowin' his graces upon me, says: 'I haven't any money, my good man!' I tell you, folks, I think Big Red'll have this critter mounted and hung up 'stead of a lamp!"

There were two men in the dingy saloon office. A lanky, sharp-faced redhead—and Tom Thess.

At sight of him Thess's mouth gaped. His feet fell with a thud from the desktop to the floor. He rose slowly.

"Well?"

Joshua yanked free of the bartender's grip.

"I want my money, Thess—'Pecos Bill' Thess."

"Money's in the safe for the night," Thess said.

"It shore is!" Big Red remarked, snickering. "And there it's going to stay. I thank you, little man. The buzzard takes the rabbit. And Big Red takes the buzzard. In a way, little man, I am indebted to you for those five hundred lovely dollars."

"Then you've still got a thousand. I want it."

"Come and get it!" Thess said, grinning. He drew his gun.

"The sheriff is on his way—" Joshua said, then stopped.

Thess's muddy eyes glazed. Big Red leaped, smashed down at Thess's gun. "Not in here, you don't!"

"Suits me!" Thess snapped. He pounced at Joshua, grasped his shirt front. He buried the gun barrel in his stomach, pulled him toward the back door.

Big Red pulled his own gun. "It ain't gonna be murder. Put it away!" he ordered.

JOSHUA closed his eyes in relief as the steel was eased away. Then, with a shock he felt a gun being thrust into his holster.

"Both of you, out back," Big Red said crisply, a gun in each hand. "It's going to be a *fair* shoot-out."

Joshua hung back as Thess strode, laughing, to the door. "Thanks, Red," Joshua said hurriedly. "Just one thing—I—I'm sort of unused to this kind of gun. Is there a lock or safety catch to fix or is it ready to shoot?"

"It's ready. All but pulling the trigger."

And pulling it first, Joshua thought wryly. Joshua had never found many of the funny sides of life, and this was the least funny of all. And yet, he realized, there was a grim sort of humor to it. Joshua Wetherstone in a gunfight!

But he was in it. They'd paced off, back to back. He was turning. The gun was out, heavy, strange to his hand. He raked his memory frantically to remember a little of the gun lore he'd heard. Guns kicked. He could recall nothing else. There was an explosion, a lash of flame, a clinking sound.

His right chap slapped back, and he knew Thess's first shot had hit one of the conchas. Again, Thess fired. The bullet hissed paralyzingly close to his head. For an instant he thought he was going to choke, and his body felt frozen.

The full impact of his hopeless position seemed to grip him. And then the reaction touched off all the agonizing years of frustration. For blind, furious moments, then, Joshua went wild. He was like a man struck by lightning, dazed, fighting in a sort of frenzy, conscious of nothing but the tug of his weapon as it blasted.

He didn't know how many times he fired. But at last he was aware of only the flat, clicking sound. He came out of the trancelike exhilaration feeling weak, realizing dully that he was firing an empty gun, and that Thess was motionless on the ground.

Thess was, they told him later, dead.

Ace Lord watched Joshua finish a thick steak in Big Red's place. The sheriff finished his cup of coffee, stood up.

"There'll be no formalities, Wetherstone," he said. "Ace and me arrived in time to witness that Thess fired on you twice before—uh—you killed him. 'Course don't expect you to get gun- happy—"

"No, sheriff. I regret all of it. I'm a peaceful man, you can count on that."

"G'night," the sheriff said. As he passed behind Joshua he grinned and winked broadly at Ace. Ace nodded, face straight, waved a farewell. Ace liked the new, almost intangible air about Joshua. A sort of freedom, born of confidence. It was a thing which Ace valued too highly to rob from another man, when, like Joshua, he was deserving.

Apparently Joshua didn't realize Thess had ignored Joshua's harmlessly wild shooting the moment Ace and the sheriff arrived, back of Joshua. Thess had directed his fire at Ace. Ace had killed him.

"Listen, little feller, you got a thousand dollars. But you'd ought to get some savvy about cattle business before you line up your own spread," Ace said. "The old man's got a couple jobs open."

"Mean you'd fix it?" Joshua said, brightening.

"Sure. There's a cook job. Or bookkeepin'."

Joshua rubbed his stomach comfortably.

"Bookkeeping? Sounds tempting. But—cooking is my trade," Joshua said. Then he added, but under his breath, "Beginning now."

Trigger Tracks

Exciting Novelette

When Sam Pierce, construction boss, set out to quell that revolt at railhead, his tracks were spiked with sixes and covered with road-gang greed.

to Railhead

By Roger Rhodes

CHAPTER I

SUNSHINE splashed down bright and warm over the rock-ballasted bed for the new railroad that wound like a huge, brown snake through craggy country. Cutting passage between high peaks, it wound along shelflike grades on mountainsides that overhung canyons a thousand feet deep.

Three hundred miles westward beyond railhead, grading gangs and bridge crews struggled on against the elements, Indians, and all natural obstructions, with tools, guns and brawn, to build that

graded roadbed on through virgin wilderness, toward the setting sun. But Sam Pierce, superintendent of construction for the Grand Pacific Railroad Company, knew that the steel had to go down over the extended roadbed before his company profited from juicy land grants and government subsidies offered by a liberal Congress.

Sam touched spurs to his horse and galloped back toward the gorge where the steel gangs worked. He reined up on a rock fill across a small ravine and saw the steel gangs at work in the cut beyond. No smile etched his smooth, young face. For days now he had not smiled. Success or failure lay in getting the rails down on time. He frowned slightly now. The frown darkened and grew ugly like a small tornado, until it completely wiped away the sparkle from his blue eyes.

His mouth clamped shut with steel-trap grimness, and he watched a carload of rails drawn up by a single horse there at railhead. Laborers took hold of the steel almost reluctantly. Spiking hammers rose and fell, but no rhythm came from them. Behind them, plate men fumbled at the job.

A gang finally unloaded the car, but they didn't turn it over on its side to let another one up. Why, dammit, they just leaned against the empty, stood there loafing! Sam cut loose a roar that might have rocked a mountain and headed his horse for the gangs. This stalling had been going on for days!

No splurge of activity took hold of the men when he galloped up on his horse. Bleary eyes, red with anger, looked up at him from round, flushed faces. Men calmly dropped their tools and stood glowering at him. Irish tongues lashed out from all directions.

"Begorry, and it's me pay I want!" one man bellowed above the others.

Another said, "Nary a man can buck rails with his guts flamed like the brimstone of Beelzebub from Hell Camp rotgut booze! The whole damn shebang of us want sick leave to straighten up, and Rail Killard says we don't need none! I'll take my time, too!"

RAIL KILLARD, assistant superintendent under Sam Pierce, walked up with a pick handle in one hand. A gruff giant of a man, with red shirt sleeves rolled back on hairy arms, he looked up at Sam and a bitter scowl darkened his square face.

"It's too damn bad these whinin' old wimmen can't drink their booze like men!" he snorted. "They stay in Hell Camp all night, tryin' to drink Big Steve Hanover out of business, then they think they can come out here and loaf on the job—but not under me!"

"We're sick—" a small laborer started to protest.

Rail Killard lashed out with the pick handle at the runty little man. Sam Pierce jerked a foot from stirrup, kicked the club from Rail Killard's hand.

"None of that!" he stated firmly, his eyes cold with pent-up anger.

Black eyes as cold and flat as a blank stone cliff returned Sam's steady gaze. A dark cloud of hatred passed over Killard's square face. "They'll work, or I'll send 'em scootin' back to the Missouri River!" he snarled.

"We need every man of them, Rail," Sam said slowly. "Unless the rails go down, the Grand Pacific goes busted. There's been too much trouble lately." There was cool admonition in his tone. "Perhaps you haven't been a very diplomatic man, Rail. You've got to treat other men like human beings."

Rail Killard exploded like a donkey boiler. He glared up at Sam. "When I come to work for the Grand Pacific," he said bitterly, "I figured on bein' construction boss—not sub-boss under a slick-chinned kid! Now, like a damn fool, you've plunged ahead with grade and bridge construction, figurin' to put the steel down with plain damn luck, I reckon. But *luck* won't do! These thick-headed idiots—" he waved a hand at the men— "can't do their work after tankin' up on Big Steve Hanover's poison rotgut. Now the Nevada Eastern will build east from the Pacific Coast faster than we'll shove on westward.

"They'll hit that fancy graded roadbed our company's spent several million dollars buildin'. And the law allows 'em to use it to string their rails on if they get there first! Now, you blame *me!*" He slapped his hairy chest. "But let me tell you, Pierce, you and your kid ideas have busted the Grand Pacific. They'll realize now that it takes a man of brains and experience—like me—to build a railroad. But it'll be too late!"

Sam Pierce swallowed hard. If the

railroad company building from the west got to that graded roadbed in time to string their own steel over it, that company—not the Grand Pacific that built the fill—would reap all the juicy land grants and government subsidies. And without that government backing, the Grand Pacific would be bankrupt! But a grim determination rose up in Sam Pierce. He looked at the steel gangs.

"Boys," he spoke softly, "perhaps Killard is right. Maybe I bit off more than I can chew. But I gambled that my crew were the best damned steel men on earth. I still think so. I depended a lot on you to put those rails down. You claim you're sick. I believe you. This isn't the first time men have come back from Hell Camp with their guts on fire. But it will be the last."

He turned his horse to ride down the fill toward the camp, but he hipped around in saddle and saw men who stood solemnly silent, looking at each other.

"Any of you boys who feel you just can't make it," he called to them, "had better take the day off. Show up tomorrow and be sober."

BEFORE Sam reached his office on a spur track near the camp, he heard the clang of steel rails as men rolled them onto cars. Then to his ears came the sweet music of spiking hammers in nearly perfect rhythm. A slow smile hovered for a moment on his full young face. Treating men right always paid dividends.

Sam went into the commissary car and found the clerk there opening a case of shirts.

"Why is it the men don't buy their whisky here, instead of traipsing off to Hell Camp every night?" he asked.

The clerk lifted a pinched face and his eyes bulged wide. "Why, hell, Sam, they buy plenty booze here," he declared. "But mostly bottles for eye-openers in the mornin'. It ain't they don't like our booze. It's this way: Men want wimmen and gamblin', and we ain't got none to give them. They traipse off for Hell Camp, where Big Steve Hanover's got everything."

That very night, Sam Pierce sent a rush order back to the Missouri River for four big tents, plenty of good corn whisky, and some barrel and bottled goods. Day after day, he waited, prodding the steel gang along with a smile and diplomacy that sent the rails on westward at a snail's pace, but he realized that he fought against a losing game, unless he could control the workers during their off hours, as well as during the daytime.

Far up beyond, staying three hundred miles ahead, the bridge and grading gangs worked on. He couldn't call them off, because that would cost almost as much as it did to keep them on the job. He knew he couldn't let them build that graded roadbed on into the west unless he expected to lose it to the competing company. He had to speed up the steel.

Three weeks later Sam's eyes showed the strain of his sleepless nights. Red-rimmed, with blue pouches under them, they stared back at him from his mirror when he shaved. But then the merchandise he had ordered from Missouri came through. He sent a crew of men to Hell Camp to put up the tents and stock them. For he had decided that men conformed to habit. Their habit was to traipse off to town every evening. All right, he thought, the Grand Pacific would furnish them entertainment. And he would put Hanover out of business! . . .

Hell Camp was roaring with all the vicious abandon of other terminal towns spewed by vice and corruption along the new railroad all the way from the Missouri River, westward. For a short time it would remain here, with its human vultures, killers, gamblers, saloonkeepers, preying on those who built the railroad.

Then, when the rails shoved on toward the setting sun, Hell Camp would uproot in a stream of damnation and follow the Grand Pacific on westward. But Sam Pierce, buckling two guns around his middle, decided to himself that Big Steve Hanover, the vice boss of Hell Camp, wouldn't move on when the town did.

Moonlight lit up the sandy street when Sam rode into town. Shabby tents, shanties, and false fronts buzzed with voices of men like beehives during a honey-flow. Tinny music rose above raucous laughter of men and dance hall girls in the honkytonks. Shadowy forms of people moved against the background of iniquity.

Sam tied his horse at a pole rack and headed straight for Big Steve Hanover's Rock-Ballast Saloon. He passed two of the big company tents that he had ordered opened, but he knew that business was not very brisk in there because he

heard little raucous laughter. Right now, Sam couldn't compete with Big Steve, because he had no women and gamblers at his places, and damned if he hired any unless they were on the level! But he noted that a sharply defined tenseness hung over the backwash of low-voiced comments from men he passed. He felt eyes turn to stare at him.

He knew that word of his coming visit to see the town boss had been here days ahead of him, for he had circulated it around freely and stayed in camp. Big Steve would be waiting for him, knowing that he was through doing business here at Hell Camp. Sam had sent word to that effect. He passed through the batwings, into the din of tinny music, pounding feet, swirling skirts, and rumbling voices.

At the long bar, men turned to stare at him. A woman squealed. Gamblers fingered their chips nervously. Sam walked down the line, guns slapping at his thighs, right to the rear of the huge tent that housed Big Steve's largest saloon.

CHAPTER II

SAM found the proprietor behind a battered desk in a partitioned-off tent office, under the shadowy bottom of a huge oil lamp overhead. Big Steve was old and grizzled, with a round, red face, and flinty eyes that met Sam's gaze. He tipped back his chair, a huge black cigar between his strong, white teeth, and hooked both thumbs in armholes of his vest.

Big Steve's overstuffed stomach trembled with mirth, as he chuckled heartily, and his broad, round-jowled face lit up with bluff good humor that was of a deceptive quality. Sam knew, because he had once seen Big Steve shed his mask of good fellowship long enough to pump six bullets into a gambler's heart.

"Howdy, Sam," the big man greeted, shoving bottle and glass forward. "Been expectin' you. Plant yourself in that chair and take a snort of that rye. It ain't so strong as the corn likker I peddle, but it's the best bottled stuff ever shipped from Missouri."

Sam placed both big hands flat on the desktop and leaned forward. "Steve, the rails must go down," he said softly. "Your women and crooked games draw my men here every night. That isn't so bad. It's the rotten, poisonous booze you sell them that I'm kicking about. If I let it go on, your booze, Steve, would bankrupt the Grand Pacific. I'm not going to let it go on," he ended coldly.

All the good humor drained from Big Steve's face. Hard lights flamed in his eyes. "I see," he said in a low voice. "So, just what kind of damn ruckus you figure to pick with me, Sam? If it's puttin' up them saloons of your'n, I don't give a damn. I run Hell Camp, and you'll run your saloons like I tell you to. There's been talk you intend to *make* all railroaders trade at your company places. Don't do it, Sam. I'm tellin' you plain.

"I don't run crooked games, and I don't sell poison booze. I'm plumb sorry I don't suit you and your railroad. But this is my town, and I'm boss here. If you don't like my town, ther move your damn railroad!" His full-jowled face lit up again and he chuckled deep down in his chest. "There ain't a damn bit of reason for me'n you squabblin', Sam."

Sam retorted slowly, "Steve, my company saloons will run straight games and sell good booze. There'll have to be women for entertainers, and I'll find some for the job. When the rails move on, you can have your town and be boss of it, because Hell Camp stays right here. Only a few decent merchants can move on to the new railhead location. You're going to stay right here, with your horde of riffraff gunmen and swindlers!"

Big Steve Hanover came out of his chair, sputtering with indignation. "Why, damn your soul, Sam, I'd oughta kill you for that!" he bellowed.

Overhead, the oil lamp licked yellowish flame up its chimney in a sudden gust of wind. A six-gun thundered and the lamp went out, shattered into a hundred fragments, just as Sam saw the back wall of the tent bulge out. He went for his guns, but through the darkness the six-gun spoke three more times. Powder-smoke filled the office. Those three crimson spears lanced through the night at Sam Pierce. He felt bullets hammer through him.

His own guns blazed at that invisible target. He felt the plank floor tremble under Big Steve's stride. Then he went down, gasping, under another hail of lead that raked his ribs and stabbed at his legs. All creation tumbled down on him in a world of darkness.

Consciousness returned to Sam Pierce four hours later, and he opened his eyes

in the hospital tent out at the steel-gang camp. Old Doc Bush stood over him, sober-faced and silent. Beyond the doctor, Sam saw Rail Killard, his square face flushed from whisky, looking at him with a kind of scathing contempt.

"Looks like you bit off another hunk you couldn't chaw," Rail said bluntly. "While you was in town hellin' around, Harrison sent you this." He handed Sam a crumpled telegram from John Harrison, president of the Grand Pacific.

"Perhaps you shouldn't read that right now, Sam," Doc Bush said gruffly, cutting a sharp glance at Rail Killard. "Your health won't be none too good for the next three-four weeks. . . . Dammit, Rail, why'd you want to bother Sam with that kind of stuff when he's lying there shot all to hell?"

RAIL KILLARD grinned crookedly. "He might as well know the Grand Pacific is nigh filled up with his cocky young ideas," he said in a tone of grim satisfaction. "Sick or not, he's still the construction boss—until he's fired!"

Sam cut a sharp glance at Killard, then read the telegram:

OWING TO THE FACT THAT MORE THAN SIX MILLION DOLLARS IS TIED UP IN ROADBED CONSTRUCTION, IT IS VITALLY ESSENTIAL THAT YOU PUSH RAILHEAD ON AT ALL SPEED BEFORE THE NEVADA EASTERN BUILDS OVER OUR OWN ROADBED TO MEET OUR LINE. REPORTS FROM YOU INDICATE A VIRTUAL STANDSTILL AT RAILHEAD NOW. FIFTEEN MILES IN TWENTY DAYS! TWO DAYS' WORK THAT IT TOOK HALF A MONTH TO DO UNDER YOUR SUPERVISION! SORRY TO INFORM YOU THAT UNLESS MORE FAVORABLE RESULTS ARE SHOWN IMMEDIATELY YOUR RESIGNATION WILL BE MOST ACCEPTABLE TO THE GRAND PACIFIC . . .

There was more, but Sam crumpled the telegram and flung it from him. Rail Killard laughed.

"Seems like you started your saloons at Hell Camp a mite late," he said. "It'd been me construction boss, I'd of had Big Steve Hanover eatin' out of my hand before I ever let him open up at Hell Camp. That jest shows the difference between a man of ability and experience—like me—and a beardless kid.

"Ain't a bit of reason why this steel-gang crew couldn't drive through with five to eight miles of track every day. You ain't strung a mile a day, last twenty days. Can't blame Harrison for gettin' worried. There's millions of dollars tied into that graded fill you built—a total loss if Nevada Easterr beats us to it."

For a long moment, Sam didn't answer. He realized that the president had every reason on earth to be worried. Booze! Poisoned booze! That had caused it all. No superintendent of construction could stop men from drinking. Sam had done everything in his power, but the work had practically stopped. With those steel gangs of his working at top speed, within forty days he could string rails over all those three hundred miles of new fill. But crawling along with a gang of sick men at less than a mile a day—why, hell, the Grand Pacific was bankrupt right now!

If they lost that roadbed to the other company, the Grand Pacific would go into the hands of the receivers. And Sam had heard that a group of Eastern sharks were the largest creditors, men who practically owned the railroad driving through from the west. That meant that they had hoped for a situation like this one to develop.

These men had loaned the Grand Pacific money, along toward the last. They had hoped that somehow they might profit by taking over the entire line when it was completed, and that the builders of the Grand Pacific would lose everything they had put into the project. Sam groaned when he thought of himself lying there in the hospital tent, flat on his back, pumped plumb full of bushwhack lead.

"How long do I have to stay here, Doc?" he wanted to know.

Doc Bush shook his gray head sadly. "I reckon you might be able to walk around a little in about three-four weeks, Sam. Couple these bullets raked your ribs, and another one put a crease in your scalp. One that hurt you most passed through the muscles above your knee. You'll have to be mighty careful how you walk around when I do let you up."

Sam glared at Rail Killard, disgust in his look. "Well, Rail," he said softly, "you've wanted to be construction superintendent for a long time now. With me flat on my back, it's fortunate the Grand Pacific has a man like you on the job. Go

out there and do your stuff. Get those rails strung through on time. I don't care how you do it, but get the job done!"

Rail Killard laughed bitterly. "Now that's mighty nice of you, Sam. Pretty nice—you bitin' of more'n you could chaw, then getting yourself all shot to hell like this. Now where does that put me? Eh? I'll tell you. It puts me right where you left off, with six million dollars' worth of graded fill on my hands and a crew of numbskull drunkards to lay them rails.

"If I whipped them into shape and got the job done, you'd get the credit. If I took off where things are now and failed to put the job across, I'd get the blame for your blunders. You'd get credit for bein' a mighty good construction boss who had hard luck. Nope, Sam, I reckon I won't ride this fall for you. You jest give orders from where you are and I'll obey. I'm just straw boss on this job. You're the big cheese."

FOR four days, Sam Pierce fretted in bed. Every afternoon Rail Killard came in with the daily report. "One mile today . . ." "Half a mile . . . lots of the boys laid off and stayed drunk in Hell Camp," Killard said, his eyes alight with grim satisfaction. On the third day he reported two miles of track laid down. But on the fourth day, he declared *all* the men walked off the job and headed for Hell Camp and a drunken spree.

Sam Pierce sat up in bed. His blue eyes flamed lightning. "Killard, I don't like to say so, but your bitterness against me is causing you to intentionally stall rail construction and bankrupt the Grand Pacific."

Rail Killard laughed without mirth, and his thick lips twisted in a snarl. "Tryin' to shove blame off on me, eh? Well, listen, smart aleck! Doc, here, tested that commissary booze you ordered from Missouri, and he found it's poisoned! Our gangs have been buyin' their eye-openers at the commissary. It's that booze, not the stuff they got in town, that's been poisoning them! That's why they all walked off the job today.

"They think you've sold out to the Nevada Eastern bunch, took a bribe to see the rails don't go down. If I was sure you hadda, I'd kill you myself!" His eyes hardened. "Anyhow, I'm wirin' in my report on same to John Harrison. If you're a double-crossin' skunk sellin' out the Grand Pacific—"

Sam Pierce almost leaped from bed, but Doc Bush shoved him firmly back against the pillows again. The doctor glared at Rail Killard.

"Now, you get out of here, and don't you come back to worry my patient!"

After Killard was gone, Doc answered the question he read in Sam's eyes. "Yes, Sam, that blamed coyote told the truth about that commissary booze. I tested the stuff and found it contained a high percentage of a narcotic that nauseates one if taken internally. Makes a man mighty sick, but don't hurt him permanently. Since you ordered the booze, they're saying you're playing ball with enemies of the Grand Pacific. Looks like they're trying to ruin you!"

Sam Pierce limped along on his bullet-scorched knee, reminder of that bushwhack lead. The wounds along his ribs still troubled him. Doc Bush had thrown a spasm when Sam got out of bed and buckled on his guns the sixth day after the shooting. But in his pocket, Sam Pierce had a report on progress being made by Nevada Eastern. In just six weeks from now that company would start putting down rails on graded fill built by the Grand Pacific. And Rail Killard was in Hell Camp with all the steel-gang crews!

Sam walked ramrod stiff, his keen-eyed glance taking in doorways as he moved along the sandy street. He nodded greetings to laborers from the railroad, flashed his white smile, instead of browbeating them with a lashing tongue for their being off the job. They looked shamefaced. They were hard, rough men, who worked with rifles at their sides, ready for attack by any hostile agents. Here in town, they would fight with big-knuckled fists when provoked.

They liked their corn likker, straight and raw, and they liked to pit their sluggish wits against the cards of slick gamblers in the joints. They called it a hell-roaring good time when they lost their money. Sam knew his men. They expected to be pounced on when they saw him coming, and when he acted so friendly they looked like spanked children. He knew doggoned well he could line every one of those fellows up and march them back to the job. But he couldn't keep them there. He had a job of his own to do here

at Hell Camp first. Then the rails would go down, fast and furious!

As he passed each saloon or honky-tonk, Sam heard muttered threats of tinhorn gamblers and riffraff gunmen, low-voiced and ugly. But they were small fry, he told himself. Those six days in the hospital had left him bitter. When he thought of how helpless that bushwhack lead had left him, he lost his smile. Tight-lipped and grim he walked on with measured stride toward Big Steve Hanover's main saloon, to kill a man.

The palms of Sam's hands felt strangely clammy. Something cold gnawed at the pit of his stomach. He tried to shrug off the feeling that he might be on his way to shoot an innocent man. For he had no proof against Big Steve—only that flickering lamp overhead in the tent office that night, the thunder of guns, and the bushwhack lead that put him out of commission. But who could have set that trap for him except Steve Hanover?

CHAPTER III

IN FRONT of a tattered tent, an old man dressed in black from head to foot looked up from under the brim of a battered plug hat. His face was lined and sour under bristly gray brows. He nodded curtly to Sam.

"Hello, Rufe, old-timer," Sam said. "Got any good caskets for sale in there?" He beckoned toward the tent opening.

Rufe Hixon's wrinkled face lit up with eagerness. "Best there is, Sam. Come right on in." He led the way. Inside the tent, he said, "Fact'ry-made boxes that come up the Missouri on boat, then on to here by rail. Best money can buy, Sam—with silver handles and glass slides. Some folks seem pleased with the plain pine boxes I make myself. But a gent like you would want the best. Who's dead, Sam?" He looked up eagerly.

"Nobody—yet." Sam admitted dryly. "But I'll take one of those special caskets, with the silver handles and glass sides. Take it out on the street and prop it up, so that people can see what a good one it is. I don't want to be called 'cheap.' I want this gent to have a big funeral."

Puzzled, the old man complied. Then Sam Pierce unfurled a strip of canvas, on which a sign was printed in bold, black lettering. He tacked the sign to the casket and stood off to view his work.

This casket reserved for the remains of the gent who bushwhacked Sam Pierce, and who tried to bankrupt the Grand Pacific Railroad.

"Holy hell, Sam!" the undertaker gasped. "If you've bought that coffin for Big Steve Hanover, you've shorely gone wrong. It wasn't Steve set that trap for you that night. Steve wanted to kill a man, he'd shoot him fair and square. I know Steve Hanover from away back!"

Sam Pierce just smiled. He stepped aside to let other men gather around to read the sign. They looked at him from corners of their eyes and commented in low tones, declaring that all hell would pop open as soon as Big Steve Hanover heard about that coffin.

While he stood there watching, a blonde girl came from a shanty doorway, took a look at the sign on the casket. Then her glance locked with Sam's. Dimples made twin pools of laughter in the pink bloom of her lovely cheeks. She tossed back her head and smiled up at him.

"We haven't met," she said. "But a man pointed you out to me when you rode into town. You're Sam Pierce, aren't you?"

He nodded, his smile bright and warm. But she wiped that right off his face when she said, "I'm Edna Hanover. Big Steve is my dad."

Sam shoved out a hand solemnly. "Glad to know you, Miss Hanover."

She refused the hand. "It's too bad you're all set to pick a ruckus with Dad—if what folks say is true. Because you're big and strong and good-looking—and you're *so young* to die! It's a pity you have no sense at all!"

A slight frown formed on Sam's full face. "Don't concern yourself over my health, Miss Hanover," he said sharply. "Every terminal town from here to the Missouri River has had its *boss*—usually some man who plundered, robbed, and murdered his way into power, until somebody stopped him. If I have trouble with your father, I think I'll be able to take care of myself." He tipped his hat courteously, aware of the pain his words had caused her.

She crimsoned to the roots of her silky blonde hair, but before she could say anything, Big Steve Hanover came from the doorway himself and took a look at the sign on that coffin. He turned slowly to face Sam Pierce. For a moment their

glances clashed. Then Big Steve tossed back his huge head and rumbled out a laugh.

He was still chuckling when he told Sam: "Nice coffin you've got there, sonny. I shore hope you don't have no hard luck when you find the gent who fed you that bushwhack lead." Without another word, he gathered up his daughter's arm, walked away.

MEN gasped with amazement when Big Steve turned his broad back and walked down the street, but that maneuver didn't surprise Sam Pierce. He remembered that night in the office that Big Steve had been smiling when the lamp was shot out. He knew that the camp boss's bluff good nature was of a deceptive quality. Big Steve could be laughing one instant, fanning lead at an enemy the next.

Sam started to cross the street to the Railhead Restaurant, when he saw Killard walk up and view the casket. He paused to watch the other man's reaction. When Killard caught a glimpse of the superintendent, his drink-flushed face drained as white as a chalk cliff in moonlight. For an instant, his eyes bugged wide with amazement. Then he moved forward.

"Why, I thought Doc said you'd be in bed for three more weeks!" he exclaimed. "Sam, you can't be stirrin' around so soon!" He didn't look at Sam. His glance flicked nervously up and down the street. "You go right back and climb in bed. I come in to round up the boys and put them back on the job. Now you pay attention to me. We've got to get them rails put down!" He looked mighty disappointed to see Sam so healthy.

Sam studied the man gravely. "Go ahead and round up the boys, Rail," he finally said. "But before I return to camp, I've got some work to do. I'm going to see that the boss of Hell Camp loses his grip." His eyes hardened slightly. "I'm not going back to bed. I'm going out on the job from now on, and I'm going to kill the man I bought that casket for."

When he left Killard, he crossed the street and found a stool in the restaurant. Ordering coffee, he sipped it slowly. He glanced up casually when three men came in. All of them were dressed in plain business suits, indicating they might be newcomers from the Missouri River towns, looking for location at railhead. Two of them remained near the front door. The third, a slender fellow, with grave face as cold as chiseled marble, moved toward Sam. His dark eyes looked out from sunken sockets. He never smiled.

His lips barely moved when he leaned close and said in a voice as soft and startling as the hiss of a snake: "Message for you, Sam Pierce." He dropped a sealed envelope on Sam's legs, moved quickly back to the kitchen and out of the rear door. When Sam looked around, the other two men had vanished out the front.

He extracted the message from the envelope, read it:

> Under pillow of third cot from door in sleeping tent down the street, you will find fifty thousand dollars in bills. A like amount will be paid you when your company *fails* to complete stringing steel over graded roadbed. Don't go near sleeping tent unless you accept this proposal. Death will be reward for broken faith, if you accept money, then fail to keep your promise.

There was no signature.

Sam crumpled it into a pocket, hurried out to the street. He saw no sign of the three men. But he now realized that something bigger than a town boss's fear of being put out of business by company saloons lay behind his attempted murder. Somebody had tried to kill Sam Pierce to get him out of the way so that it would be possible to bankrupt the Grand Pacific Railroad and steal that constructed roadbed for the Nevada Eastern.

Beads of sweat popped out on Sam's forehead. He told himself that if he got his hands on that fifty thousand dollars the scoundrels offered, then failed to keep faith with them, that they would come to him seeking vengeance. He might catch them and learn who was behind the whole crooked scheme. He limped as fast as he could toward the sleeping tent, went on in.

In the dim light inside, he saw rows of cots. Workers usually rented those cots when they remained in town overnight. Sam's heart thumped wildly when he found the parcel under the pillow of one of them. Then he saw the oldster watching him from a partitioned-off office.

"Know who left this parcel here?" Sam asked grimly.

"Yep, shorely do. Three gents in city

clothes give me five dollars to keep a eye on it. Said Sam Pierce would be in after it and for me to be shore and recognize him by description." He suddenly looked past Sam. "There is your friends now, I reckon."

Sam whipped around. The three men closed in quickly. One of them said: "So you *were* selling out the Grand Pacific, eh? You dirty dog!"

Sam looked straight into the hard eyes of the man from whom he'd received that note.

"WE WORK out of Central Office," the slender man said. "Special agents." He flashed a badge. "I'm Bob Lawder. You've heard of me. John Harrison got wind you were playing along with Nevada Eastern, selling out the Grand Pacific. Rail Killard gave the lowdown, I hear. Honest man, Rail. Good railroader. Damned good thing he got the hunch about you, else you'd have busted the Grand Pacific.

"You went for our bait like a duck after a June bug, Pierce. But I don't suppose that's evidence enough to send you up. You'd lie out of it. But it's enough to blast your chances for ever again working such a swindle on another railroad. You're done for, Pierce!" His flat, cold eyes stared out of sunken sockets, contempt in their depths.

Sam had an urge to swing on the man. But he restrained that urge. He nodded slowly. "Things look bad, Lawder," he said. "But I'll demand a trial, and I'll get a clean bill out of this deal. I'll not take it flat on my back!" His full face pulled tight in grim lines. "Am I free to go about my business, now, or am I under arrest?" No use trying to explain to these fellows, Sam figured. A man couldn't beat a case until he got to court.

"We're through with you," Lawder said. "And so is the Grand Pacific. Only we'll be on hand to see you take the first train for the Missouri River tomorrow morning. Can't have you hanging around railhead, perhaps doing more dirty work for the people who bribed you. Arrest you if you refuse to go."

Sam's huge right fist balled, but he slowly unclenched it. "Fair enough," he stated calmly. "I'll clear my name before daylight, or I'll tuck my tail and run like a whipped cur!"

Bob Lawder's hard eyes lit up with admiration. "You're either the hardest nut I ever cracked—or you're an innocent man, Pierce. If you're not guilty, why don't you come clean with us boys? We're for you, if you're on the level."

Sam smiled. "Here is all of it," he said simply, and told about Big Steve Hanover's saloons, the poisoned men, the attitude Rail Killard took, and the reason he had come to get that parcel of money. "That's all," he said.

Bob Lawder looked thoughtful. He swapped glances with his two assistants. "Boys," he declared softly, "this case is getting hot! Why would Rail Killard report his suspicions to John Harrison by wire, then ask us to string along for a while without making a move when we got here? Then, why would he suddenly decide that we'd better get the goods on Sam Pierce, and even suggest a way for us to do it?" He unwrapped the parcel and disclosed stacks of neatly trimmed newspaper, instead of money. His cold eyes bored into Sam.

"This was a trap Rail Killard set for you. Came rushing over to the saloon where we were loafing about ten minutes ago, all excited. Told us he'd got a tip you were in town to meet a contact man for the Nevada Eastern, and that if we would plant this phony parcel of money somewhere, you'd be sure to go for it. That would be our evidence. Now, I don't know. How about it, boys?"

Sam said quickly: "Reason Rail Killard changed his mind about the action to be taken was because I got out of bed unexpectedly and he knew I was out to stay. Regardless of what you men think, I know in my own mind now that Rail Killard must have been the man who set that bushwhack trap for me, not Big Steve Hanover. I suspected it, and I came to town to kill him when I learned he had all the men here keeping them full of booze.

"I also believe he's the one who poisoned the commissary booze and made the men sick. You'll note there's no *name* mentioned on that coffin over there." He pointed across to the casket he had bought.

Sam explained that only he and Rail Killard had known about that particular shipment of whisky being ordered for the commissary. Somebody undoubtedly had doped the booze before it left the warehouse.

"Some spy for the Nevada Eastern

tipped off our enemies about that whisky shipment," Sam said softly. "Told them to put the drug in the whisky. I didn't do it, so it must have been Rail Killard. I'm going to choke the truth out of that man, or I'm going to kill him!" He moved away from the railroad detectives. They didn't follow.

Sam crossed the street and pulled up at the coffin he had bought. He took his big blue pencil and scratched out some words on the sign, put in others. Now he stood back to survey his work.

This casket reserved for remains of Rail Killard, who bushwhacked Sam Pierce, and who tried to bankrupt the Grand Pacific Railroad. Unless he clears my name.

CHAPTER IV

SAM walked away, for he wanted Rail Killard to see the sign. He wanted to work the same psychology on Rail that he had worked on Big Steve, but he had an idea that Rail's reaction would be different from that of the town boss. He didn't want to bring things to a climax too soon, for he was of the opinion that it did a crook a lot of good to stew in the juices of his own corruption for a while.

Killing Rail right quick would not clear Sam's name. He hoped to make the man commit some overt act that might definitely tag him with the guilt that was his due. Sam figured he'd better go find Big Steve Hanover and apologize for some of the things he had accused the town boss of. He failed to find Big Steve at any of his own saloons. It never occurred to Sam to look into one of the company places. But it mystified him when he walked into the town boss's largest saloon and saw the place practically deserted.

Only two gamblers sat at a table, idly shuffling cards and dealing to each other. A single bartender lounged behind the long bar. Not a dance hall girl was in the place, and not a customer! Cold, challenging eyes bored into Sam, and he felt the hostility of those glances. He figured it was just a backwash of the animosity he might have stirred up in Big Steve Hanover, reflected in the loyal men who worked for the town boss. He didn't ask where Big Steve was, and nobody attempted to speak to Sam. He left the place.

A small boy met him as he returned to the street. The ragged little fellow handed Steve a penciled note on a piece of scrap paper. He read it slowly. Now he knew Killard had fired that bushwhack lead.

Sam Pierce:

I see you're still trying to tack your own hellish blame on an innocent man. All right, Pierce, I've stood enough of your nonsense. It's about time I killed you. I've changed the sign on that coffin to read: *This casket reserved for remains of Sam Pierce, who tried to bankrupt the Grand Pacific Railroad.* And I've signed my name to it. If you're not plumb yellow, you'll meet me in the middle of the street in half an hour.

Sam Pierce felt a change in the very atmosphere. Men watched him from the sidelines, contempt plainly stamped on their stern faces. He heard one man say boldly:

"Serves him right—stirrin' up all that hell against Steve Hanover, when all the time Sam Pierce was figurin' on takin' over Steve's saloon and gamblin' business. Damn his soul, cuttin' prices and givin' free credit to all comers to take Steve's trade. And hirin' all Steve's barmen, card-dealers, and gals for them company places. It's a mighty good thing Rail Killard caught up with him on that crooked deal to bust the Grand Pacific, else—"

Sam collared the man. His blue eyes blazed. "Just what are you talking about?" he demanded. "I haven't cut prices or hired Steve's help!"

The man jerked loose. Other men closed in to side him. One of them glowered at Steve. "Don't start nothin' with us. Go on out there where Rail Killard can shoot your gizzard out, you double-crossin' sidewinder. There's too many of us for you to buck! Now git!"

Sam read the hostility in those flashing eyes. He didn't understand just what it all meant. Those men weren't railroaders. Perhaps they were some of Big Steve's riffraff gunhands. Sam turned away, went on to meet the man with whom he was now forced to have a showdown. In him lurked all the sinister characteristics of a gunhawk veteran of a hundred powdersmoke sessions with tough men up and down the new railroad. The feeling puzzled him, for he had never killed a man.

Now the thought of bloodshed strangely revolted him. He found his thoughts dreaming into a pair of upturned blue eyes that haunted his memory. In his ears still rang the girlish laughter and barbed taunts of Edna Hanover. She had told him that he was big and strong and healthy—and too young to die. He thanked his lucky stars that he had not clashed with her father, before he learned the truth about Rail Killard.

Sam reached the center of the street and stood waiting for Rail Killard to show himself. He saw railroad workers come from the saloons and other places. Gamblers, women, everybody in Hell Camp turned out to witness the gunfight. They hung well back out of the line of fire. Every one of them looked up the street at a man bearing down on Sam Pierce like a cyclone across prairie country. Sam gasped in amazement when he recognized Big Steve Hanover, not Rail Killard! And there was no doubt of the town boss's intention. He was riled for a shoot-out! But why?

BIG STEVE HANOVER, vice lord of Hell Camp, moved forward with measured stride. Sam saw livid rage flow across that full round face. Piercing, eaglelike eyes met his own glance. Big Steve pulled up in his tracks, a grim old man. Broad and deep of chest, he stood spread-legged, huge hands on gun butts, challenge in his very posture.

In that moment Sam Pierce recognized cold fact for what it actually appeared to be. Big Steve, not Rail Killard, was here to settle things in gunsmoke! That meant that Big Steve must be the man behind the plan to bankrupt the Grand Pacific, and that Rail Killard was merely a stooge for the town boss. What else could it mean?

"You ain't got no sense at all," Big Steve gritted. "Else you'd know I wouldn't stand for no more of your nonsense in my town! Now, dammit, I'm gonna shoot you down like a yellow dog!"

A chill passed through Sam Pierce at the sound of that furious voice. From the corner of his eye he saw Edna Hanover over in front of a saloon, trying to shove her way through a group of men there. But there was only one thing left for him to do now.

"All right, Steve," he said slowly. "I'd be happier if you'd sent Rail Killard to do the job. But I'm ready when you are. I'll kill you when your guns clear leather."

Big Steve Hanover's round face was livid. "Why would I send Rail Killard to do my shootin'? I'll kill him when I'm through with you!"

Slowly, he inched his guns from holster, with all the sluggish ponderance of a wounded bull buffalo cornered in a rocky canyon. He knew that he must die, but he intended slowly and deliberately to take Sam Pierce with him.

Through Sam Pierce flashed a truth as solid as the mountain he stood upon. Somehow, there was a mistake that sent Big Steve to shoot it out with him. Sam thought of what those men had told him about cut-rate prices on booze.

He remembered that Big Steve's largest saloon was almost empty. He recalled that the town boss had warned him not to make it compulsory for railroad workers to patronize company saloons. He had not done so. But Rail Killard had been giving orders during Sam's sick absence. Driven to the wall, had Rail Killard taken a parting shot at Sam by ordering those cut-rates and doing other things that might send Big Steve to a clash with him?

"There's something wrong here, Steve!" Sam gasped. "Hold the deal!"

But Big Steve's guns leaped from holsters. Over in front of the saloon, Edna screamed, just as her father's guns belched crimson flame and killer lead. The girl's voice cut through the mountain air sharp and clear and penetrating. With both guns streaking crimson, Big Steve jerked around when he heard his daughter scream. Bullets that might have drilled, clean and neat, through Sam's chest whistled away up the mountainside.

"Rail Killard's got my gal!" Big Steve bellowed like a prodded steer. Without a backward glance at Sam, the oldster charged toward the sidewalk, with Sam on his heels. "Danged that varmint's hide!" he thundered.

Big Steve parted a group of men like a thundering mountain slide. Sam got a glimpse of Rail Killard ducking into one of the company saloons, dragging Edna Hanover with him. Guns blazed in Rail's shaky hands, when he shoved the girl roughly aside and faced his pursuers for an instant. Bullets cut blazing streaks past Sam's head. He had both guns out, but he didn't dare return the other man's fire, for fear of hitting the girl.

couldn't see 'em good, for the fightin' was at saddle-gun range. No use tryin' to pick up their trail, so we hit for town, most of us needin' a sawbones."

As he dressed their wounds, Doc Stone wondered if they had come to see how he would take the news of the battle. Nothing in the young doctor's face or the swift, sure movements of his hands betrayed his fear that old Lark might have been one of those slain. After they had gone, Cleve put on his white Stetson, went to the closet where hung the six-gun and belt he had never expected to wear again. At that moment a horse halted outside. Lark Meacham entered, dragging his right foot. He dropped in a chair and tried to grin at Doc.

"Me and the Harbison outfit was wolf-huntin'. You've heard of hunters shootin' each other by accident—"

The look on Cleve's face stopped him. Doc pulled off the boot, the blood-wet sock. Lark had lost two toes. With one ear strained for sounds in the street, young Stone set grimly to work. Lark, clenching his teeth, didn't speak until the foot was neatly bandaged. Then he said:

"Harbison and a couple of his boys was hurt worse'n me. If you could go up and see 'em, Cleve—"

THE screen door slammed, and Pascoe and his friends crowded into the room. Hand on six-shooter, the Broken Rail boss roared: "One of the boys seen you limp in here, Meacham! Stopped a bullet s'afternoon, didn't you?"

"I did," replied Lark, with amazing coolness, "but how'd you know? Was you wolf-huntin', too?"

Pascoe took a step forward, barking, "Two-legged wolves, yeh! Don't stir, Meacham, till I get your cutter!"

Doc Stone had moved to the right side of Lark's chair. He said, "I'll get it!" He snatched the Colt from Lark's holster, swung it on Dave Pascoe, who stopped dead, staring.

"When you were here before, Pascoe," said Doc, "you said you didn't recognize any of those rustlers. Lark tells a different story about how he was shot in the foot."

"You know he's lyin'!" Pascoe burst out. "If you protect him, you're as bad as Meacham!"

Doc Stone eyed him coldly. "I've never killed a man, but I'll begin now unless you clear the way to that door! Lark's leaving!"

Pascoe remembered to have seen such a look on Cleve's face long ago, when he stood over old Eph Stone in a powder-smoked cabin. Old Dave sidled toward the wall, motioning to his friends. Meacham limped past them, Cleve following, the gun covering the cattlemen until he was outside. He rushed Lark into the saddle, stuck the pistol in his holster, though the oldster protested:

"You'd better keep it! They'll gang you!"

As the horse clattered off, Doc wheeled. Pascoe and his friends were silhouetted at the door, wary about rushing out. Dave was the first to discern Cleve's empty hands. He leaped onto the sidewalk, fired at the vanishing horseman. Doc sprang at him, jerked his arm down. Other figures spilled through the doorway. Cleve's fist cracked on the jaw of one cowman. Then a gun barrel, catching him behind the ear, felled Doc.

He came to, sprawled in an office chair. Tod Buckins, the town marshal, was in the group surrounding him. Buckins was saying:

"I don't like to arrest Doc, that's a fact."

"You will if you want to keep your job!" Pascoe snapped. "Meacham's a rustler, and Stone let him get away. That's obstruction of justice. Lock him up till the sheriff gets back."

Marshal Buckins said reluctantly, "Guess I'll have to, Doc. Can you walk? Let's go, then."

Cleve spent the night in the Brushwood jail.

"I feel like a dog keepin' you here, Doc," the marshal told him next morning. "My wife would've died, hadn't it been for you. Now she's sure on the mend."

Cleve had been thinking things over. "I wouldn't like to get you in trouble, Tod, but if I was loose for a few hours I believe I could do a better job of catching those rustlers than the sheriff."

"How?" said Buckins. "Evidently you don't think Lark's one of 'em."

"Ever know him to steal?" asked Cleve.

"Never." Buckins thought awhile. "I owe you a debt money can't square. I'll take the responsibility of lettin' you out. But Pascoe and his friends, knowin' how I feel, are still in town. They're watchin' for that very thing to happen. Better wait till night and play safe."

By eight o'clock that evening, all the cattlemen had apparently gone home. Marshal Buckins ushered Cleve out the back door of the calaboose, wished him luck. Palming the knob of his office door, young Stone detected the faint clink of spur chains dragging on the ground. Doc wheeled, made out the familiar form of Dave Pascoe, flanking a six-shooter.

"I figured that no-account marshal would release you after dark," Pascoe said in a brittle tone, "so I been watchin'

gun-hung crew would fight it out to a finish for that girl's sake. But law was law, and Sam was a railroad man.

"I'm sorry, Steve," he said softly. "But you can't defy the law."

A terrible oath slipped past the oldster's lips. He ordered his men: "Boys, shoot the first railroader who tries to harm Rail Killard. I'm goin' to guarantee Rail Killard safe conduct out of this town—provided he won't harm Edna." He would try it, too, when complete darkness descended.

From the thick-walled storehouse came Rail Killard's mocking laughter. "Looks like the odds are stacked against you and them danged railroad dicks, eh, Sam?" he taunted. "I'm comin' out with a load of dynamite and the girl in front of me, as soon as Big Steve says it's safe. And I'll blow myself and the gal sky-high, first one of you takes a shot at me or even comes close!"

Sam's lips tightened. He gave his steel-gang men a level look. "Most of you boys have been embittered against me through lies told against me," he said slowly. "But it's not me asking help tonight. It's the Grand Pacific. I'm a railroader, boys, first—last—and always. And this is a railroad job here tonight. If there's a railroader among you, then step over here with us."

He held his breath while men hesitated. He knew that some of them were fighting down old bitterness roused in them by Rail Killard's lies. Then Sam saw that bunch of rugged steel men move toward him. They lined up beside him, facing the killer crew with old Steve Hanover. Something warm and pleasant pulsed through Sam. For now he knew that when this job at Hell Camp was done the steel would go down over that new graded fill, because his steel-gang crew was whipped up to top fighting shape. They were his men and they would battle for him.

Some of Big Steve's gun-hung men saw the handwriting on the wall. They had no stomachs for mixing with those burly steel men. A few of them slipped off into the gathering darkness. Big Steve snorted. He threatened. He shook his huge fists. But one by one his men left him, for there was no loyalty in those gunhawks who hung on like human leeches around Hell Camp. None of them wanted to die for the town boss. They cared only for their own mangy hides. When darkness came down like a blanket and blotted out everything, Big Steve admitted failure, for he stood alone, with not a backer beside him.

"Steve, I'm going in and get that prisoner," Sam Pierce said softly. "If that rat in there has the guts to blow the place up, I'll die with your daughter." He headed for the partly opened doorway of the storeroom.

SIX-GUN thunder instantly rumbled inside the place. A bullet snapped past Sam's head, and Rail Killard's taunting laughter cut through the night. But Sam moved on toward that doorway. From out of the storeroom came a comet-like object hurtling through the air, sparks sputtering from a fuse attached to one end. It fell to the ground at Sam's feet with a nerve-shocking thud, but it didn't go off. Sam was thankful that it took a forty-pound jar to set off that low-grade dynamite.

"There's a purty for you!" Rail Killard taunted.

Sam glanced down at the three sticks of dynamite, bound together, at his feet. He saw that fuse eating on toward the detonating cap. He realized that he would be blown to kingdom come when the stuff went off. Men scattered away in all directions.

For an instant, Sam stood transfixed, paralyzed with terror. Then, moved by desperation to get that sputtering bundle of destruction away from him, he scooped it up in both hands and started to fling it out into the darkness. But men screamed out in horror when they saw his intentions. He held the bundle, afraid to hold it, afraid to throw it away. He didn't want to blow somebody else up, in order to save himself.

Sam glanced quickly at the length of that sputtering fuse and gauged its burning time. Then, with the bundle of dynamite hugged close against his chest, the fuse still sputtering, he dashed madly toward that opened door.

"All right, Killard!" he shouted. "You claim you'll blow yourself up—so here goes all of us!"

Sam made a sparkling comet as he rushed through that doorway. No gun thunder came from there to stop him. Inside, Rail Killard could see him plainly now, looming up in grim silhouette against the background of moonlight outside. Sam gambled that a trick that

worked one way would work when turned on its originator. Men outside were afraid to shoot into the storehouse, afraid their bullets might touch off the dynamite in there. Sam knew that Rail Killard was not a courageous man, because no brave man would shield himself behind a girl. Killard wouldn't dare shoot at the dynamite Sam carried!

"Go ahead," Sam challenged. "Take a shot at me, Killard. Maybe you'll hit this load of dynamite I'm carrying, and we'll all go to hell in a hurry!"

No bullets came, but through the darkness Rail Killard yelled, "Don't you come a step closer, or I'll kill this girl with my six-gun, Pierce!"

"The instant you shoot that girl, I'll start blasting!" Sam bellowed.

"Sam, throw that sputterin' stuff out the door," Killard pleaded. "If them three sticks go off in here, it'll blow us all up when the rest of this hellish stuff goes up! Throw that stuff out the door!"

"As soon as you walk out and turn that girl loose, Killard."

In the darkness that sputtering fuse grew so short that it would soon be burning Sam's fingers. He moved on toward Killard, holding his breath. For if Killard fought on with the desperation of a cornered rat, things were going to be mighty hot around here mighty soon. But from one corner of the place came Killard's voice, quaking with terrible fear!

"I've turned her loose! Now, Sam, you throw that stuff out of here!"

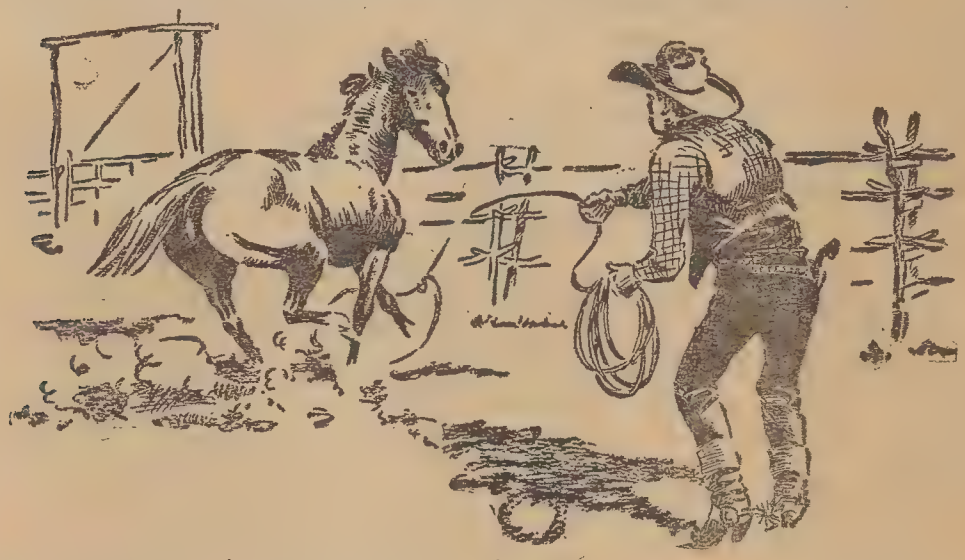
Past him, Sam felt the girl as she ran toward the door, her skirt whisking by, a gust of wind behind her. He smiled grimly.

"Now it's your turn, Killard," he said coldly. "Go out and give up, or I'll hug this infernal machine until she sputters us both into eternity!"

Killard whimpered like a terrified child. "I'm comin', Sam! I'm comin'!"

KILLARD passed Sam like a red-ball freight, and the panting, choked-up cry of horror that slipped from him floated back through the doorway. Sam walked outside and saw him handcuffed between two railroad detectives. Rail Killard's eyes went wide with amazement when he saw Sam fling an inch of sizzling fuse on the ground and step on it to put it out. The detonating cap was still jammed into an end of one of the sticks of dynamite Sam placed gently on the ground.

Rail Killard gasped. "Why dammit, he pulled out the fuse and walked in on me, and there wasn't a bit of danger of that stuff goin' off. He bluffed me!"



Sam looked at him, smiled tightly. "Of course. We were both bluffing, Killard. Neither one of us had the kind of guts it takes to blow up those cases of dynamite in that storehouse. We both bluffed, but I won by boosting the ante."

Big Steve Hanover stood with an arm around Edna. Across his heavy-jowled face a slow smile spread. A chuckle rum-

bled up from deep inside him.

"I never seen the like of it," he admitted. "First time in all my borned days I ever been so scared my hair stood straight up like quills on a porcupine's back. Sam, you're the gamest gent I ever met. I'd shake your hand and call you friend, if I was plumb certain you didn't intend to enforce that law about all railroaders drinkin' at them company saloons, and if you'd stop sellin' booze at cut-rate prices. I'd shorely like to be a friend of the gent who saved my gal's life." His round face beamed.

Sam smiled at him. "The Grand Pacific Railroad company would like mighty well to go out of the saloon business, if there was a town boss around Hell Camp who'd see that the steel-gang crews didn't overdo things when they came in for their sprees, Steve."

Big Steve chuckled. "Whenever Hell Camp moves on to a new railhead, you'll be boss, Sam—not me!" he declared. "I'll clamp down a strict nine o'clock curfew, and at closin' time every night, I'll gun-whip these men of your'n back to camp. You'll get the rails down, Sam. You can't lose, not with me and these hard-headed gandy-dancers fightin' with you!"

The steel-gang men cheered wildly. Sam felt elated. Edna moved close to him, her eyes sparkling. She tucked a hand under his arm.

"But it doesn't end right!" she said, laughing. "There's no dead man to put in that coffin you bought, Sam!"

He grinned down at her. "You and I are going to take that casket out to boot hill and *bury the hatchet* in it," he told her softly. "You and I started off, from the first, fighting each other. But things will be different now." And the way she smiled up at him, he knew that they would.

Sam Pierce sat his big roan horse on a graded fill, two weeks later, and watched the steel gangs working on a shelflike shoulder of the mountain. They unloaded carloads of rails with machinelike rapidity. They dropped each rail in place with regularity and precision. Plate crews connected joints. Spiking hammers rose and fell with a rhythm that made Sam's heart thump with pure rapture. He turned to Edna on the sorrel horse beside him, and his eyes glowed with pride and happiness.

"Eight miles of railroad a day!" he told her. "At that rate my boys will put the line through, with a lot of time to spare. A swell steel gang! A swell one, honey!"

And the way he put his arm around her so possessively indicated that he and she had gone out to boot hill and buried the hatchet in that nice coffin, because she rested her blonde head on his shoulder and seemed to like the way he hugged her.

Of Course,

You Can't Be There—But—

NO, you can't be there at the dressing station to give him a mother's care. All you can do is be thankful that the Army and the Red Cross take such good care of our boys. But you can help see to it that such precious supplies as blood plasma, food and ammunition, reach the front in prime condition—ready to do their job.

For every one of the 700,000 items shipped to our troops is protected against weather and dirt by paper and paperboard. That's why your government asks you to use less paper, and save every scrap you can. Remember that every time you are tempted to waste paper or destroy it,

Remember

PAPER IS WAR POWER

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Every Colt Has Its Day

By Joe Archibald

Will Chessman admitted rustling those Rolling J beeves. And a ranchman jury reckoned a dose of the noose would cure Chessman permanently. But the Rolling J boss figured an even tighter way of law-branding that hard-riding gallows bait.

BRECK SUNDERLAND looked up from his cluttered desk in the big living room of the Rolling J ranch house to watch his wife, Faith, carry a bowl of fresh flowers to the table near the window. She was still slim and straight and very beautiful, and during the twenty years that she had belonged to him the passage of time had made little impression upon her. His thoughts reached out to a night long ago when he had seen her for the first time. The few words she had spoken then had changed the tenor of his whole life.

He said, "They're not pretty enough to do you justice, Faith," and she turned slightly and gave him the smile he was ever eager to see. "This reminds me of that night. The thunderclouds rolling in off the hills. That quiet just before a storm."

"Claire stopped by this afternoon, Breck. She talked of hardly anything but young Will Chessman. She'll make him a good wife, I know."

Sunderland said, his face losing some of its softness. "He's a headstrong lad, Faith. I wonder if he's good enough for her."

"You said the same thing about yourself when I said I'd marry you, Breck." Faith laughed and leaned against his shoulder. They could both look out of the big window and see the land they owned as far as the dimly outlined low range of hills miles to the south. Breck Sunderland had gone a long way in twenty years and in Parsang, ten miles away, he was an important man.

The thunder growled closer and Faith Sunderland said, "It looks like we'll get some of it, Breck. I must go up and see that the windows are closed."

She left the room and Sunderland dropped into a chair and heaved a great sigh of contentment. He filled his pipe and was touching a match to the bowl when he heard a thump of steel-shod hoofs on the long grade stretching down from the low butte back of the big corrals. He walked out onto the porch and waited for a horseman to come up. The man rode a bay horse and Sunderland knew it was Hack Saltoun of the Slash O. Hack swung close to the porch rail and leaned out of his saddle to speak to Sunderland.

"Breck, I think you better come with me. We got a man dead to rights with a few head of your stock."

"Who?" Breck Sunderland asked.

Saltoun whispered, "Will Chessman, Breck. I didn't figure you'd want the sheriff sittin' in yet. I let Lin Scott know."

Sunderland said, "Be with you in a minute, Hack." He strode down to the long bunkhouse and called to a little man cooling himself off on the steps. "Saddle up for me, Bill." He stood waiting and listened to the thunder roll over the sky, watching the lightning lick at the high

crags, and again his thoughts went back to another night.

"Breck," Faith called from a window. "You're not going out? The storm—"

"Figure there's something to attend to, Faith," he said and turned slightly. "I won't be long."

Sunderland rode out with Saltoun and took a road stringing southwest.

"We run into him in a coulee, Breck, me an' three of my riders," Hack explained. "An' he showed no fight. I figure we'll settle this our own way. Some of the new law we've been gettin' in this neck of the woods has been too cut and dried."

"Good thinkin', Hack," Sunderland said and felt drops of rain spatter his cheek. "How about Will's boss?"

"Sent a man to get Frank," Saltoun said. "He'll want to put on the pressure."

THEY rode for almost another hour before they came to the coulee where seven men were waiting. Lin Scott of the Diamond T and Frank Starbuck, owner of the Crow Track, appeared atop a ridge when Saltoun and Breck Sunderland slipped off their horses. Sunderland saw Will Chessman sitting on a windfall, his hands tied behind him.

"Hello, Will," said Sunderland.

"Howdy, Mr. Sunderland." Will Chessman was very young for a foreman, but he had ridden and roped since he had been able to keep his legs glued to the sides of a bronc. "I haven't a thing to say. I figure they got me to rights. Just do it almighty quick if it's on your mind."

Starbuck said, "Let's get it over with, Breck. What are we waitin' for?"

"Charlie Olmstead, Frank. This has got to be a fair trial," Sunderland said.

"Why bring him into this, Sunderland?" Will Chessman asked. "He's Claire's—"

"I know, Will. But four men ain't enough to give a fair vote. I figure Charlie wil' want to be a part of this jury."

"You know how it'll go," Will said.

"How many head of stock have you stolen, Will?" Hack Saltoun asked.

"None," Will grinned. "You caught me with these, my friend."

Starbuck snorted. "He's lyin', Breck."

"Why should he?" a Slash O rider wanted to know. "What can he gain?"

The storm rumbled overhead, mostly wind and very little rain. Charlie Olmstead rode down into the coulee, his slicker flapping in the wind.

"You crazy fool, Will," he yelled when he got out of the saddle.

"Reckon," Will said. "Somebody slide a cigarette in my mouth, will you?"

"We'll get goin'," Breck Sunderland said. He tried not to look at the rope that was thrown over a limb. He thought of his wife, Faith, and years that might have been different. "Mind if I act as foreman of this jury, gents? They were my cattle."

"You're welcome to the title, Breck," Starbuck said.

Sunderland said, "We have got to be fair here. Will Chessman is no scum of the hills. In every youngster I've ever known, there has been a reckless streak that has to be satisfied at least once. Sometimes they need a little finery or a new saddle real bad or somethin' you can't measure in terms of cash or the equivalent thereof. A youngster hates to wait even though he has more time in which to do it than men our age, my friends."

Starbuck showed his impatience. "We didn't come here to listen to a sermon, Breck."

"But you are goin' to, Frank," Sunderland said, lifting his voice above a drum roll of thunder overhead. "You can hang this man for one mistake or you can let him go and watch him become a respected member of society. I know one man in Parsang who is looked up to by all who know him. You all know that man. If it wasn't because somebody gave him a second chance once, he would have been dead many years.

"He was a lot like Will Chessman here. He fell in love with a pair of tooled boots with silver spurs and a saddle trimmed with brass studs. He stole a horse to get them gewgaws. He had a narrow squeak in Shermanville, just fifty miles from here."

BRECK SUNDERLAND stopped and swept the faces of the ranch owners around him. They were silent now, attentive.

Will Chessman choked out, "I'll take what's comin', boys. Why drag this out?"

"Shut up, Will," Sunderland said.

"There isn't hardly a man in the county who hasn't stepped outside the law at least once in his life. Every one of you here start lookin' back. If you'd been caught an' judged right sudden, a lot of you wouldn't be here. That man of Parsang that I mentioned did something men have hanged for.

"Will Chessman had a reason to do what he did. Charlie Olmstead ought to know. Claire is a girl who is mighty sweet an' fine and Will is in love with her, and the days were gettin' too long for him to live apart from her. He figured she was worth a gamble—"

"Keep her out of this," Will said. "Hurry and finish, Sunderland, so's we can pass the plate and sing——"

"Was I right, Will?" Breck asked evenly.

"Let's say you are," Will Chessman said under his breath.

Breck Sunderland said, "Starbuck, if your past is lily white, if you've never gone outside the law even a little, you vote to hang Will Chessman. You, Hack—and you, Charlie. And how about you, Lin Scott? Don't tell me you are all angels and never hankered to grab a little excitement, take a short cut to somethin' you wanted. Maybe I can tell you the name of the old horse thief, my friends. We'll take a vote now."

Starbuck spoke. "It's raining harder, Breck. Let's finish it here." He looked at Sunderland, as quickly dropped his glance.

"I'm voting for acquittal, Breck," Charlie Olmstead said. "I suddenly remembered the time when—"

Starbuck interrupted him. "If it's all the same to you, Breck, let's call it a unanimous vote. Reckon Will has got his scare. You think so, Chessman?"

"Lost ten years sittin' here," Will said while a man loosened his bonds. "You got my word. If I ever—"

"You'll hang right quick," Breck said. "Get on that bronc and ride like the hounds of hell was ridin' your tail."

When the reckless kid had gone, Starbuck looked at Charlie Olmstead and said, "Since when was you respected by everybody in the community, you old horse thief?"

"I could ask the same of you, Frank," Hack Saltoun said. "You are kind of quiet yourself, Scotty."

"I guess you won't find out in a hurry," Breck Sunderland grinned. "In the mornin' you can wake up feelin' pretty proud of yourselves when you might have woke up with a picture of Will Chessman swinging at the end of a rope. The Bible is quite a book of law, friends. That part that says you should cast the first stone if your own soul needs no cleanin', it's strong medicine and will always be. One thing those paid lawmen ought to get more interested in, boys. They call it the human equation."

"You talk too big for me," Hack Saltoun said. "Anyway, I'm gettin' wet and I'm goin' home." He held out his hand to Breck, and then Scott and Starbuck and Olmstead got in line.

Breck Sunderland said to Olmstead when they shook hands, "And see Will gets a start, Charlie, and before he's too old to get on his knees to ask Claire a question."

Sunderland got off his horse in the Rolling J ranch yard close to midnight. He walked into the ranch house and there he found Faith waiting for him—as she had been waiting for him another night long ago.

"You're wet, my dear," his wife said. "Whatever made you go out on such a night?"

"Had to get somethin' settled with the others, Faith," Breck said. "It is a wild night." He crossed to the fireplace.

Faith smiled and came over and knelt down beside him. She looked up at him and said, "Just as wild as the night you came riding into Shermanville as if demons were after you. You were a reckless looking man and you scared me to death at first. You got more than you bargained for, didn't you, Breck? Remember, I hid you in that closet and then when they had gone I wouldn't let you go?"

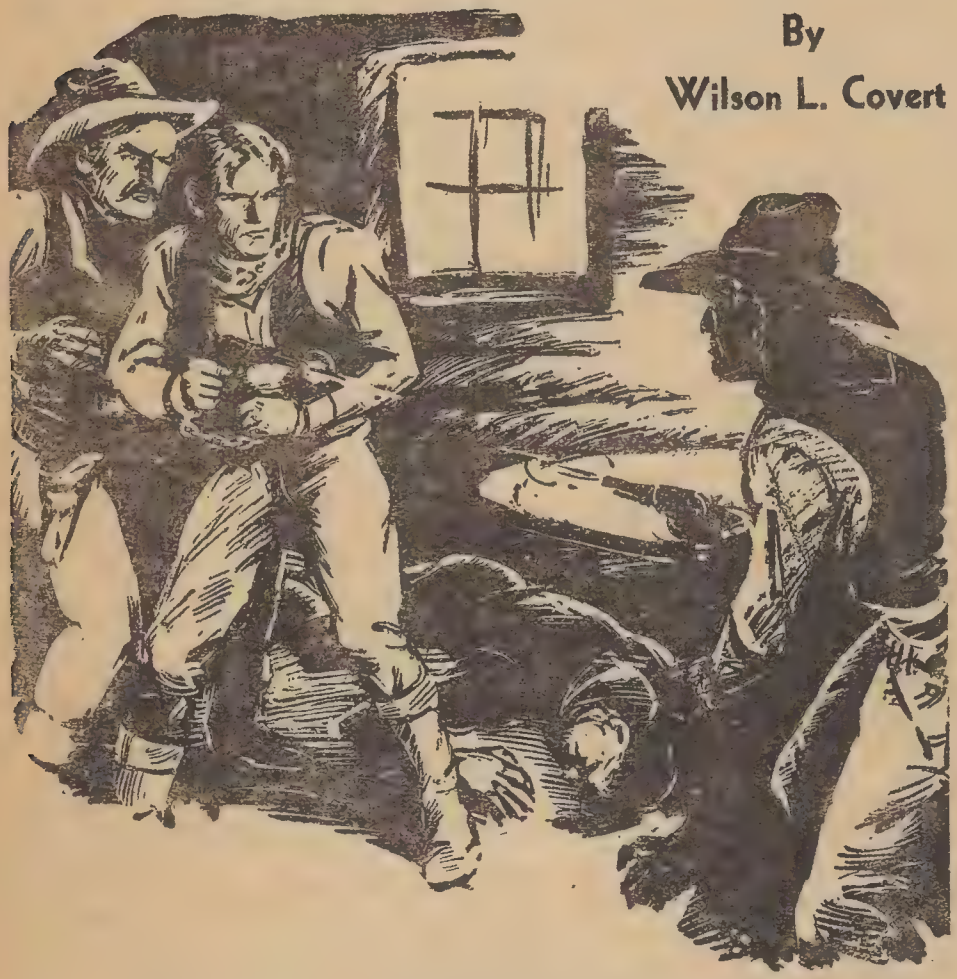
He grinned and drew her closer to him and thought of an old saddle that was hanging out in the stable. It was studded with little chunks of brass, and from the horn a pair of old boots dangled that must have been wonderful to look at when they were new.

"That Will Chessman," Breck said. "Claire will make him a good wife."

"I won't ask where you were tonight," Faith said softly. "Somehow, my dear, I do not wish to know."

No Peace for a Pistoleer

By
Wilson L. Covert



When Harley Beeton tossed his guns aside to become a saddle maker's sidekick, he thought he had buried his pistol past. But one hombre unearthed that Colt career, and once again Beeton had to fog a .45 to blast a hell-torn trail.

AS HE HUNG up his hat and leather jacket to go to work for Eph Sibley, the saddler of Wagonjack, Harley Beeton noticed the sheriff's dodger on the shop wall. The Colorado & Western Railroad would pay well for information leading to the capture of the bandits who had twice rifled the express car on the run between Wagonjack and Iron Gulch.

"Them train robbers," Beeton remarked to the saddle maker, "are worth a lot of money on the hoof."

"Got away with nearly a hundred thousand in both holdups," stated Sibley. "Take off your guns, Beeton, they'll be in the way. You can start in mendin'

this set of harness. Where'd you learn the trade?"

Reluctantly, Harley unbuckled his gunbelts. It was seldom that he removed them. Still, there was the width of a state between him and the region where that last sheep and cattle feud had turned out disastrously for Beeton and the men who had hired his guns.

"I was apprenticed to a saddle maker in Cheyenne once," he answered Sibley's question. "I like to work leather, and I don't like ridin' winter range."

"I'll keep you busy till spring, cowboy," grinned Sibley.

Ten minutes later, Beeton looked up from the bench he straddled as two men entered the shop, the younger one closing the door against a keen wind. Father and son, thought Beeton, and cattlemen by their garb. The elder's sharp eyes rested a moment on the young Coltman, then he spoke to Sibley.

"Cold day, Eph. How near is that new saddle finished?"

"All but the toolin', Mr. Kenner," replied the shop owner, pointing to a saddle on a rack, fine example of his craft.

Young Kenner had been gazing out the window. A girl on a roan went by and he pulled the door open, saying over his shoulder, "See you later, Dad."

His father turned quickly, saw the boy greet the girl and walk along at her stirrup. Kenner scowled. He left the shop, telling Sibley he would call in a day or two to get the saddle.

Sibley said to Beeton: "Brad Kenner don't like his son Davy takin' up with Ash Wilder's girl. Ash runs a little cow ranch. Brad's manager for the big Spanish Hat outfit, owned by an Eastern syndicate. Just between you and me, Beeton, I wouldn't want him runnin' my business. Gambles too much. Leastways, he used to, and lost thousands at the Four Aces. I reckon he gets a big salary, but not enough to play like he done."

"Usin' the syndicate's money, eh?" said Harley.

"Who knows?" retorted Sibley, with a wink.

That evening Harley Beeton was taking a whisky at the Four Aces bar when the proprietor addressed someone behind the young Coltman.

"Glad to see you. You haven't been in to buck the games in more'n six weeks."

Brad Kenner's voice answered, "Lost too often, Mitch. I've sworn off."

Mitch chuckled. "You'll come back to it."

Kenner's shoulder brushed Beeton's. "Howdy, young fellow? I saw you in Sibley's shop. Have a drink with me. At a table, where we can talk."

HARLEY wasn't loath, though surprised that the manager of a big cattle company should be so friendly to a stranger. Kenner selected a table remote from others. He filled Harley's glass twice before remarking that he wouldn't have expected to find him at such a tame occupation as harness mending. His speech suggested that he knew Beeton, who had felt so safe on reaching Wagonjack he hadn't thought about using an alias.

"I'm just a hibernatin' cowboy," Harley began.

"No you're not." Brad Kenner laid a newspaper clipping on the table. "This wasn't in the local papers. I'm from Arizona, subscribe to my home town paper. You recognize the fellow in the middle, of course."

Beeton was looking at the reproduction of a photo taken several months prior to the range war in which his two gun pals had been slain. He had escaped by the skin of his teeth.

His smile faded and he said coldly, "Well?"

The ranch manager leaned toward him. "I want a little rustler killin' done. I know the thieves, but can't get evidence the sheriff would act on. You know how sheriffs are sometimes. They figure a big outfit can stand the loss. Besides, Sheriff Lockridge is busy tryin' to run down the train robbers."

"I aim to spend a peaceful winter. I don't want the job," said Beeton firmly, and he pushed back from the table.

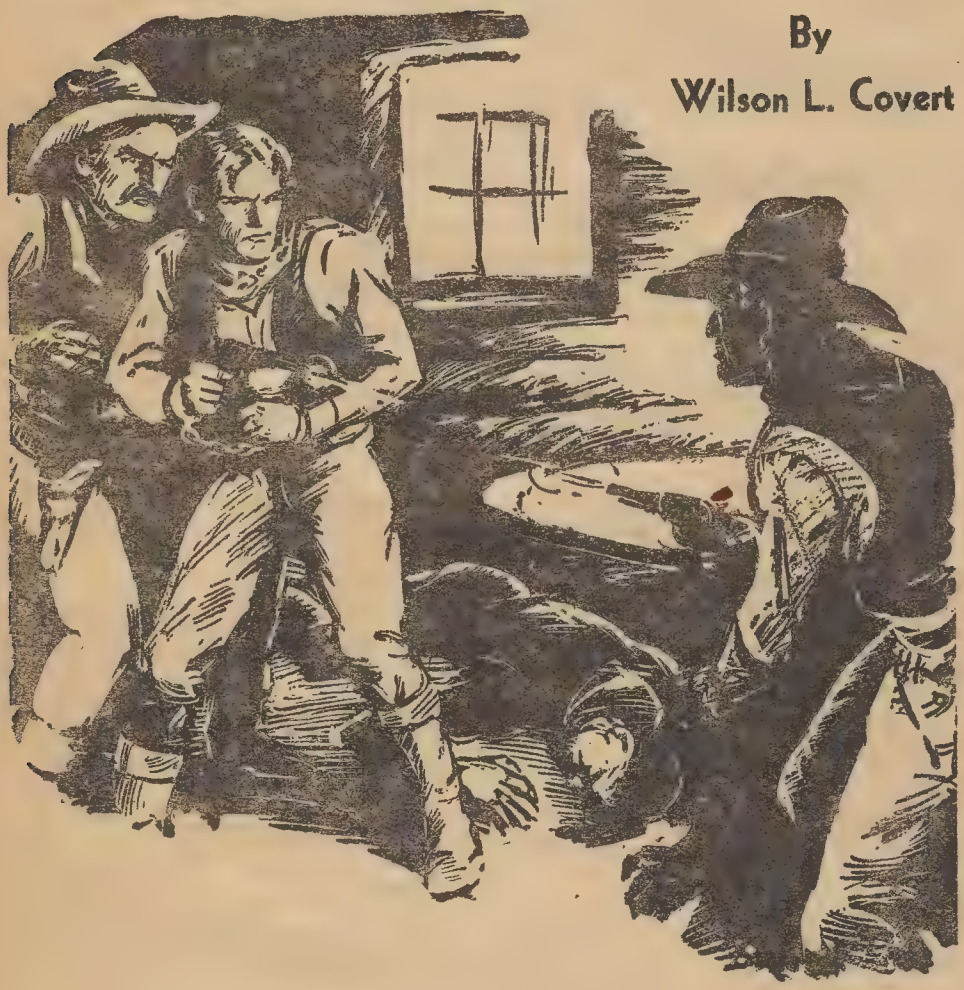
"Don't be in a hurry." Kenner's tone was low, but commanding. "This clippin' says a certain Arizona sheriff would be very pleased to locate you. I could wire him if you refuse to help me out. Better reconsider."

Beeton knew he could saddle up and be far away before the machinery of the law got in motion. But the threat nettled him. No man had ever intimidated Harley Beeton.

"Tell me more," he said shortly.

No Peace for a Pistoleer

By
Wilson L. Covert



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"I aim to spend a peaceful winter. I don't want the job," said Beeton firmly, and he pushed back from the table.

"Don't be in a hurry." Kenner's tone was low, but commanding. "This clippin' says a certain Arizona sheriff would be very pleased to locate you. I could wire him if you refuse to help me out. Better reconsider."

Beeton knew he could saddle up and be far away before the machinery of the law get in motion. But the threat nettled him. No man had ever intimidated Harley Beeton.

"Tell me more," he said shortly.

The leader of the gang, said Kenner, was Ash Wilder, on Bolero Creek. There were five others at a little ranch several miles from Wilder's, owned by the Hatch brothers, Bob and Tod. Kenner wanted Wilder killed first. Harley listened with a poker face. Was Kenner really having rustler trouble, or was it something else? Sibley had said he was opposed to Davy Kenner's interest in Wilder's daughter. Hardly sufficent reason for putting the old man out of the way.

Kenner replaced the clipping in his pocket, took out a wallet. "I'll advance you half on the Wilder killin'. When you get him. we'll talk price on the Hatch boys and their pals."

"Pay me when I report on Wilder," said Beeton, and rose abruptly.

He obtained an afternoon off from Eph Sibley, saying that he had to keep his bronc exercised. He headed up-range till he struck Bolero Creek and followed the lively stream. There was the feel of snow in the air, and his leather jacket wasn't too warm. Harley was not seeking out Ash Wilder for the purpose of killing him. Brad Kenner had made himself an enemy when he threatened Harley Beeton. The Coltman was interested to learn his true motive in desiring wholesale destruction of the small fry of the range.

Snow was falling, darkness coming on when Beeton rode past a frame ranch house, tracing the ringing sound of an ax to its source. A girl in a mackinaw was chopping wood back of the house. She appeared startled as Beeton jogged around the corner. He'd caught just a glimpse of Nan Wilder the day Davy Kenner had hastened out of the saddle shop to meet her. A slouch hat was jammed over abundant brown hair. Her eyes were hazel, and the anxious light in them vanished at Harley's disarming smile.

"Ain't there any men around to do this chore?" he said, sliding down and taking the ax from her unresisting fingers.

They were acquainted by the time he had chopped two armloads of firewood. He told her he was giving Sibley a hand during the winter months, had been riding to get the kinks out of himself and his horse. Harley liked the way she laughed, a soft, clear, silvery sound.

Nan invited him to supper. "We couldn't let you go away without it after chopping all that wood. Put your horse in the barn."

WHEN they came out and crossed the yard, a whiskered man stood at the back door. Unkempt-looking, with sly eyes, Ash Wilder, as the girl introduced him, had the appearance of one who would burn a brand or kill from ambush. He seemed uneasy about the stranger, eyed him continually while they were at the table. Mrs. Wilder had the sorriest expression Harley had ever seen on a human face.

The girl looked out the door as Harley remarked he'd better be getting along. "It's snowing so hard," said Nan, "why not stay here tonight? I'm sure you'll be welcome."

A snort from Ash raised a doubt of this. "Where'll he bunk, huh? No room in the house."

Beeton didn't fancy the cold night ride back to Wagonjack and he was interested in that strange household. He said, "The barn's all right with me, if you've no objections."

Ash Wilder shook a surly head. "None."

Nan pressed extra blankets upon the Coltman before he trailed out into the driving snow. Plainly she had enjoyed his company. Harley himself had never spent such a pleasant evening, despite the evident suspicion of Wilder and his wife that he was some sort of a badge-toter.

He rolled out of the hay a little while after daybreak. The snow had ceased, the sun shone, but a bitter wind cut across the plains. Harley started for the house, came to a dead stop when he observed five horses ground-hitched at the side of the dwelling, manes and tails bannering in the driving wind. If Wilder had summoned the Hatch brothers and their hands, the only breakfast he'd get would be served hot out of shooting-irons.

Slogging back through the snow, Beeton saw where the wind had swept clear a pile of trash, not far from the barn. There were the charred remains of a wagon wheel, some boards and fire-twisted metal. A piece of board, sticking up, caught his eye. Black letters stood out: *EXPRESS CO.*

Glancing toward the ranch house, he lifted the half-burned board from the trash heap. It could have been the top or side of a strongbox, with the metal binding pried off. His mind supplied the miss-

ing part of the inscription—Wells Fargo. When whole, the box no doubt had contained part of the hundred thousand taken from Colorado & Western express cars.

The crack of a gun made Beeton jump and spin about, dropping the telltale board, flicking out Colts. There was a long rip in one sleeve of his jacket. The rear windows had been thrown up, in spite of the cold, and hostile faces filled each aperture. His guns drumming, Harley sprinted for the open barn door. A couple of tawny-mustached men, who looked alike, probably were the Hatch brothers. Either Bob or Tod, leaning far out to trigger, stopped one of Beeton's slugs with his face. He jackknifed across the sill, his hat falling off, long arms hanging down.

From somewhere inside, Nan's voice rose in a scream. "Ride, Harley, before they close in!" The back door was jerked wide in the same instant. The gang pelted down the steps, three turning to the right, two to the left. Beeton's six-guns blazed busily, knocking over one lanky fellow, who afterward crawled to the woodpile and began shelling the barn. Two others, touched by lead, kept on in the race for cover nearer the supposed lawman's shelter. It was a novel situation for Harley, that he should be mistaken for a tinbadger, but he rather liked it.

Old man Wilder, with bullets kicking up snow clots around his bounding heels, gained a wagon twenty yards from the barn, slid under it and stuck his Colt out between the spokes of a wheel. Beeton could have killed him with one of those slugs. But, because he was Nan's father and the crime he had committed obviously not what Brad Kenner claimed, Harley spared him for future use.

The Coltman's position became untenable. With Wilder and the man at the woodpile able to pitch lead through the barn door without unduly exposing themselves, Harley had to retreat inside. The minute he did so, he heard the crunch of boots on snow. The other three were advancing to surround the barn. It was time to be going.

His guns reloaded, Beeton saddled quickly, pulled his horse through the barn's rear door. He swung a leg up as the icy wind struck him. The outlaws caught the sound of hoofs and leaped around the upper end of the barn, smoke blossoming from their Colts. Whipping up his .45's, Harley poured out a hail of slugs that sent them skipping back to shelter.

RACING down the frozen creek, Beeton expected to be tailed as soon as the gang could straddle leather. He had covered about two hundred yards before a gun spoke again, the single blast of a six-shooter. Harley looked over his shoulder, surprised that anyone had tried to cut him down at that range. Whoever had fired must have stepped back quickly, for no one was in sight at the barn. Funny, he thought.

His back trail was clear all the way to Wagonjack. He told Sibley he had stayed overnight at Wilder's because of the storm, adding nothing to that bare statement. Harley wanted time to think over his next move.

Sibley went out to lunch at noon. As though he had been watching close by for the saddle maker to leave, Brad Kenner, bundled in a sheeplined coat, walked into the shop, a grin on his face. He dropped a package of bank notes on Harley's bench. The Coltman stared at the money, then at Kenner.

"I came down past Wilder's ranch this mornin'," said the Spanish Hat manager. "Ash's women folks were diggin' his grave, cryin' their eyes out over the worthless saddle bum. If they knew who'd shot him, they didn't say. You're slick, Beeton."

"It wasn't me," stated Harley, remembering the shot fired when he was out of six-gun range. Things were getting very mixed.

Kenner smiled broadly. "You needn't fear admittin' it to me."

"If the Hatch brothers are yellow mustached fellows," Beeton went on, "I killed one of them. Six in the gang that attackd me up there. You didn't see any of 'em around?"

The ranch manager's surprise was genuine. "No! I wish you'd cleaned 'em all out. A dead Hatch is worth a couple hundred more, and here it is. Keep workin' on them. I'll see you later."

Harley's eyes narrowed on the departing figure. He put the money in his leather jacket, hung on a wall peg. After supper that evening he started up the icy sidewalk toward the livery stable, to see that his horse was properly cared for. Because

of the extreme cold, few people were abroad. He noticed two men loitering in front of a darkened barber shop, but thought nothing of it until, as he came abreast of them, one suddenly rammed a gun in his side. Then he recognized the hawk features and drooping tawny mustache of the Hatch brother he hadn't killed.

"You come with us, fellow," growled Hatch, "and no fussin'. Take his other arm, Luke."

Beeton, with that gun against his ribs, walked quietly between the two outlaws. At the end of the street stood a low-roofed saloon. Here they turned in, passing through the bar to a back room. Beeton had been in such places before, where the scum of a grazing district gathered, and no man interfered in another's business, whether robbery or a killing.

As the door of the rear room closed behind Beeton and his captors, the Coltman saw two flint-eyed men at a table. A candle stuck in a bottle shed a dim light. Hatch tossed Beeton's guns on the table. Once more the Coltman was facing the gang he had battled with at Wilder's ranch, minus two members.

"He came without a rumpus," said Hatch.

"You boys," said Harley, "have the wrong idea. You think I'm a railroad detective, after you for them holdups."

Hatch said, "We did, till we learned different this afternoon. Know you're a gunman, name of Beeton."

"Who told you?" snapped Harley.

"It's true, ain't it?" retorted Hatch. "If you had killed Ash Wilder, instead of my brother Tod, we wouldn't have fetched you here. Wilder needed killin'. He was likely to squeal any time."

"You killed him yourself!" accused Beeton.

"Yep," admitted Bob Hatch, "seein' my chance. I'd 'a' done it sooner if I'd been sure the boss wanted him rubbed out. Shell out the money you was paid for that job. It's comin' to me."

"If I do—what then?" Harley said tensely.

"I don't want your blood smeared over it," Hatch snarled, "but I'll take that chance and bore you first if I've got to!"

Beeton scanned the merciless faces. "I'll tell you fellows somethin' you don't know. You were all on the death list."

"All of us!" Hatch expelled his breath sharply. "That's a lie! Where's the money? Get it out!"

BEETON, opening his leather jacket, slapped the bank notes on the table. The pressure of Bob Hatch's gun fell away as he reached for the money. Harley jerked up his guns, swept the light to the floor with a swinging Colt barrel and sprang against the wall of the suddenly pitch-dark room. The stillness of death held for seconds. The train robbers knew the enemy they couldn't see was no slouch of a gunfighter. He was close by the door. The first man who opened it to get out, whether Beeton or one of the gang, would let in a flood of light and become a target for roaring death tubes.

Boots scraped the floor, snapping the tension. A man hurled himself at the window, carrying away the sash, cursing as the glass cut him. Harley's shot missed the outlaw. The Coltman shifted along the wall as lead searched the spot where his smoke-iron had flamed. Others hurtled through the window, triggers working. Harley kept shifting, answering their fire.

In the sudden quiet, he realized he was the only man in the room. From the bar rose excited voices. Harley bolted the door, crossed to the demolished window. No forms dotted the snow outside. His shots hadn't killed because he had been so busy dodging as he was triggering. Harley stepped over the window sill. Crossing the main street, he saw men running toward the low-roofed saloon. He went back to Sibley's.

Midmorning of the next day, Beeton stopped working on the hame of a horse collar as two shadows fell across the sunlit shop window. Davy Kenner and Nan Wilder were peering in at him. The girl clutched at Davy's arm as he moved from her side, laying hand on the doorknob. He entered with purposeful stride. Harley rose from the bench, no more lethal weapon in his hands than the horse collar. Davy was holding a six-shooter on him.

"You're the man who killed Ash Wilder, Beeton!" he snapped. "Get your hat and coat, and come along. The sheriff is down from the county seat. It's a curious thing that I should run across a news clipping about you at the ranch, just this mornin'. You're a professional killer."

"Him!" exclaimed Eph Sibley, who had

been looking on in amazement. "I'd begun to like that boy real well."

Nan Wilder had disappeared when Kenner and Beeton left the shop, the latter walking in front of Davy's gun. Brad's son shot a bewildered look around for the girl, then prodded the Coltman along the sidewalk. Sheriff Lockridge was smoking a cigar in the Trail Hotel lobby when young Kenner announced he had brought him a murderer and produced the clipping.

"Killed old man Wilder, eh?" Lockridge scanned the news item. "Wanted in Arizona. Wouldn't be surprised if he was hooked up with those train robbers, Davy. I'd about decided the gang was located near this town. If he won't talk, I'll take him to the county seat, sweat it out of him."

Harley was quite willing to talk after Davy had left in search of Nan. But he found that a gun record was no help to a man trying to disprove his connection with a train robbing gang. The sheriff laughed to scorn all he had to say about Brad Kenner.

"Wilder wasn't much account, nor the Hatch boys, all I heard of 'em. But why try to drag in one of the big men of the county, Beeton? Brad Kenner a train robber, handin' out cash to gunmen! It don't make sense."

He left Harley in the town marshal's charge, and was gone until late in the day.

On his return, the sheriff told Harley: "Nobody at Wilder's ranch, though I found that piece of express box. Nobody at the Hatch place, either. What did you do, have a fallin' out? Caught you anyway, Beeton, and I'll track down the others."

It had started snowing that afternoon, and the storm had reached blizzard proportions long before the train for the county seat pulled into Wagonjack, at eight in the evening. The sheriff, with Beeton handcuffed to his left wrist, got aboard. A slender figure darted up the steps of the coach behind. Davy Kenner, coming along the platform at that moment, his coat collar turned up, glimpsed Nan Wilder and swung on as the train was getting under way.

THREE miles out of Wagonjack, the train stalled in a huge drift. The conductor came through the cars, announcing they would be delayed until a snowplow cleared the track. Passengers divided into groups to while away the time in cards and conversation. Sheriff Lockridge settled his head against the car seat, while the man linked to his arm gazed out at the snow-veiled night. Inside, Beeton was as gloomy as the storm-bound country beyond that lighted window.

His gaze shifted as men suddenly filled the vestibule doorway at the forward end of the car. Men with flour sacks over their heads, snow thick on their garments, pistols glinting in their hands. The sheriff jerked erect.

"Some of your pards," he muttered to Beeton, reaching cautiously for his gun. "If you try to hamper me, you get a bullet."

There were sudden outcries, frantic movement on the part of the passengers to squeeze into corners or lie flat on the floor. Bob Hatch's voice spoke out of an eyeholed sack.

"Ladies and gents, we don't usually bother the passengers, but tonight the express car's buried so deep it's hard to get at. We'll ask you to make liberal contributions as we pass along the aisle."

"Hands up!" yelled the sheriff.

They hadn't seen him until then. The gun in Hatch's hand flamed. Lockridge, a hole through his hat, sagged against Beeton, who had slid down on his spine. The sheriff was breathing heavily, eyes closed. Harley, keeping below the seat ahead, worked his free hand into the lawman's pocket. He got out the handcuff key, and in an instant was rid of the steel bracelet. Picking up the sheriff's gun, he heard one of the bandits say as boots scuffed down the aisle:

"Blowed the top of his head off, I reckon, but make sure."

Beeton thrust the Colt over the forward seat, stretching his neck far enough to draw a bead on Hatch, in the lead. There was a roaring double discharge, Hatch letting go a second time when the sheriff's gun rose to view in an expert's grip. The outlaw's bullet smashed the window at Beeton's side.

Reeling against the man behind him, Bob Hatch for a moment formed a shield of which his mate took quick advantage, pitching lead under the dead bandit's right arm. The bullet penetrated the car seat, searing Beeton's shoulder. Buckling for-

ward, Hatch's body struck the floor. The exposed outlaw raised on his toes with a scream, as Harley's gun spoke.

The burly man next in line, pistol tilted, wasn't looking Harley's way, but at someone in the aisle. Beeton jerked his head, suddenly leaned past the crumpled sheriff. Davy Kenner was stooped in the aisle, his gun rising on the big outlaw. Harley's driving fist upset Davy as the Colt exploded.

The big man threw down on Beeton, who twisted to face him, his gun-hand coming up, unraveling muzzle fire. The outlaw grabbed at the arm of a seat going down, flopped on his face. Davy, glaring at Beeton, had righted himself. He opened up on the two train robbers crowding into the vestibule. Harley's gun crashed in unison with Davy's, and the masked men slumped down, blocking the car door.

"How'd you get loose, Beeton?" demanded young Kenner. "Why'd you hit me when we were both shootin' at the same targets?"

Harley searched the angry face. "Don't even suspect, do you? C'mon, let's look at that big guy."

He walked up the aisle, paying no heed to the hysterical passengers, who were surprised to find themselves alive. Beeton pulled the flour sack from Brad Kenner's head. The ranch manager's eyes were open, life still in him though he was going fast. Davy, at Beeton's elbow, uttered a stifled cry and sank to his knees.

"SORRY I've disgraced you this way, Davy," his father said with a visible effort. "I gambled away the syndicate's money, had to get it somewhere or face a long jail sentence. Wilder and the Hatch boys were ready enough to help me rob trains. I wanted to quit when I had made up my gamblin' losses, but they wouldn't have it that way, especially as I'd taken the largest share from both holdups. I had to get rid of them. So I hired Beeton—"

"You only thought you did, Kenner," the Coltman broke in. "I understand you couldn't get one of the gang to do the killin'. Yet it was Bob Hatch, after all, who drilled Wilder and claimed the money you gave me. Why were you all so afraid Wilder would squeal?"

"He threatened to, more than once, because I held out against Davy marryin' his daughter," replied Kenner. "I didn't think she was good enough for the boy. I made a mistake tellin' Bob Hatch you were a gunman I'd hired, Beeton, but I didn't know what else to say when he reported they had had a fight at Wilder's with a railroad detective." Brad's speech became slower, less distinct. "I wouldn't have come tonight, but they forced me. Davy . . ."

He died, looking at the anguished face bent over him. Harley turned away, encountering the gaze of two people standing quietly in the car aisle. One was the sheriff, a bandanna around his head, the other Nan Wilder, in mackinaw and slouch hat.

"You!" Beeton said, staring at her.

"Yes, Harley. I got on the train when you did. Until now I really thought you had killed Dad, but that was done in self-defense, when the gang jumped you at our ranch. I couldn't see you hang for murder, so I was going to try and release you from the sheriff. Davy had followed me onto the train. He said I was foolish to attempt it. Harley, Sheriff Lockridge can't take you away for something you didn't do!"

Harley puckered his brows. He could scarcely believe that what he saw in her eyes, heard in her voice, was true. "If I didn't know you were Davy Kenner's girl, I might think you liked me pretty well."

Davy had risen, stood gripping the back of a car seat. "Nan, please forget what Dad felt about you. I've asked you a dozen times to marry me."

"And I've refused every time, Davy. You're a nice kid," she said it in a way to ease the hurt, "but I never loved you. I'm terribly sorry."

Davy's eyes sought Harley's grave face. "It's you, Beeton. I don't know why, but you're the man. Anyway, I'm grateful to you for knockin' me over a while ago. It's bad enough, but would have been worse if I had—if I'd hit where I was aimin'."

"I was sure you were too excited to recognize him, Davy. Wouldn't have shot him myself if he hadn't throwed down on me." Harley put out his hand and Davy slowly gripped it.

Sheriff Lockridge, catching Harley's eye, took a newspaper clipping from his pocket, tore it to bits.

"I don't suppose," he remarked, "that Arizona sheriff will ever know what became of the last of them three gunmen.

Beeton, the train robbers would have finished me if you hadn't taken up the fight. How do you like foggin' a gun on the side of the law?"

"Real well," smiled Harley, "but no more fightin' for me of any kind—not with six-shooters."

"Havin' cleaned up that gang," said the sheriff, "I reckon you're entitled to the reward offered by the Colorado & Western. It's a lot of money."

Beeton slowly shook his head. "Blood money. First time I ever refused any, but I do. I was all fixed to work for Eph Sibley through the winter months."

"If he won't take you back," said Nan, "our ranch is terribly run down, Harley. We have some cows. They're really ours."

"And I own the best cow horse that ever looked through a bridle." Harley pulled the girl's arm through his. "I don't reckon that snowplow will reach us much before mornin'. Long as we're headed for the county seat, sheriff, Nan and I'd as well get married there, with you as a witness."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Western Aces, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1944

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Western Aces and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business manager are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Periodical House, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Rose Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Warren A. Angel, Rockville Centre, New York; C. A. Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Ill.; E. Campbell, Mount Morris, Ill.; E. L. Angel, Rockville Centre, New York; Ace Magazines, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Rose Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.; Warren A. Angel, Rockville Centre, New York.

3. That the known bondholders and mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs, next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 13th day of September, 1944.

ROSE BLUMENTHAL, Notary Public,
New York Co. Clk's No. 855, Reg. No. 975-B-5
Commission expires March 30, 1945

King of the Gunhawks

By Seymour Irving Richin

An episode in the life of one of the Southwest's most notorious and colorful badmen.

"I WANT to order a burial." The slim, dark-eyed stranger entered the funeral parlor in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and addressed the proprietor. "For a man with a long memory."

The undertaker glanced up, his wizened face puzzled. "Eh? Where's the corpse?"

"He's not a corpse." The stranger smiled humorlessly. He was slender but hard-muscled and had inscrutable, Indian - black eyes. "Not yet."

"Poor fella gotta suffer 'fore he cashes in his chips, eh?" The undertaker shook his head mournfully. "Not that it's just business, you understand," he said. "But I allus did say it's better to be dead than dyin'. Who is he?"

"Me."

The undertaker gasped. His face flushed a deep, humiliated crimson. He glared at the cool, grimly smiling stranger. "There's somethin' else I allus say," he exploded. "I'd rather rub elbows with one of my corpses than a smart-aleck like you! What kind of tongue oil are you trying to sell me?" He stopped abruptly, his eyes bulging. The stranger had flashed hard money, was pressing gold into his hand.

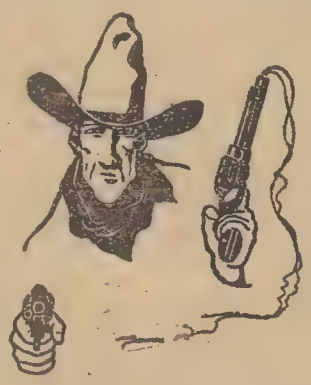
"I don't talk to hear myself," he was saying evenly. "You're bein' paid in advance to collect a corpse. Someday the newspaper headlines in this state will tell you that a bank robber named Henry Starr was shot dead pullin' a job. Bury him decent with his boots off."

Aghast, the undertaker divided stares between the gold in his hand and the piercing black eyes of the stranger. He said awesomely, "Sure, sure. But you—you're—"

"I'm Henry Starr."

With that one of the most notorious and colorful badmen the Southwest ever saw, swung on his heel and strode out.

Sometimes a lone-wolf raider, on other occasions applying his cunning at the head of a gang. Henry Starr never failed to consider and prepare carefully for any eventuality—even as he had for his own death. Outlawry was no outlet of social bitterness for this desperado. And more than the prospect of quick riches, it was the savage thrill of combat and raw, high adventure that lured him to the lobo trail. *Live dangerously* was his motto. He followed out that creed.



He made a science of handling firearms, was a deadshot with a six-gun and a Winchester rifle. Though all his gunhawks, Frank Cheney, Happy Jack, Bud Tyler, Hank Watt, Link Cumplin and others, were selected unbiasedly for their skill with weapons, Starr was matchless among them. On one occasion he performed the remarkable feat of shooting and killing a running coyote at six hundred and eighty-five yards with a single shot.

But more amazing than Starr's sharpshooting ability was the quality of his daring. He was absolutely fearless, without nerves. Manhunters nicknamed him the "Bearcat" for his tenacious courage

in battle. It was well deserved. No amount of gunfire could rattle him. Though bullets tore the clothes from his body and his men dropped about him, shot to dollrags, he held fast to a nerveless calm.

The hotter the danger, the more calmly did he react. It was in his blood. Half Cherokee and half Irish, he combined the wild fighting heart of his white forebears and the implacable patience of the Indian tribe, whose dark, heavy features and muscular grace he inherited. He needed both redoubtable qualifications on that day of his first important, and almost suicidal, assault upon the People's Bank of Bentonville, Arkansas.

STARR planned the raid with characteristic thoroughness. Stationing his gang in the near-by hills, he drifted into town and devoted a week for scrutinizing the area. He made a mental map of the bank site, cataloguing indelibly in his mind every street, alley, store, house and empty lot. Especially, he marked the hardware store which harbored the usual supply of ammunition and guns.

He was grimly logical. The townspeople might frustrate his escape plans, kill their horses, forcing a street battle. Knowledge of the area would then be crucial. And their ammunition might run low. The hardware store would then possibly offer them the lifesaving difference between freedom and the noose. Starr was overlooking nothing.

He even strode into the bank itself, shrewdly noting the habits of the clerks and the time of day when the greatest amount of gold and cash was available. The bank counters were littered with wealth. The sight of thousands of dollars within range fired Starr's daring. He went so far as to strike up a friendly acquaintance with the town marshal, all the while craftily sizing up his opposition and studying the lawman's daily routine! The marshal suspected nothing.

At last, his preparations complete, Starr hit leather and headed back to his gang, who were waiting agitatedly in the hills. He was troubled only by the nature of the terrain. There were fifteen miles of open countryside between Bentonville and the hills, a hellish gantlet to run, should they be forced to escape under fire from a posse.

Some of the gang demurred at this danger when Starr revealed the results of his investigation. "Runnin' that gantlet is askin' for a fast funeral," one objected, "unless we bust into the bank at night. That way we at least have a chance for a getaway in the dark."

Starr's coal-black eyes flashed. "Getaway, hell!" he flared. "You mean getting killed. Any raid I ever boss will be pulled in daylight. Any coward can hide behind cover in the dark and pot-shoot an outlaw. But it takes guts for a man to shoot it out in broad daylight with desperadoes. Their fear is our best weapon —that and surprise. If we charge in like I'm tellin' you, those hombres in town will hunt cover instead of us. And we'll be in and out before they can stop shakin'. C'mon, let's give 'em hell!"

Objections faded among the men under the influence of his personality and reasoning. Ordinary conversation diminished, ceased. A new, feverish excitement gripped them all, the anticipation of tomorrow's events. Tomorrow they might haul in a king's ransom. Tomorrow they might kill—or die.

At two-thirty the following day, the party of seven rode into Bentonville. Henry Starr and Frank Cheney led the cagey procession, riding ahead in a buggy, their two horses trailing. Their weapons were out of sight, rifles hidden under blankets at their feet and sixes concealed under their coats. Behind, inconspicuously scattered, five horsemen followed.

His eyes glittering, Starr drew rein as the buggy reached the bank. Both men leaped out, unhitched their horses and led them to an appointed tie-bar where they were met by an accomplice, Happy Jack. The latter seized the bridle reins. He already was holding the split ribbons of the other outlaws' horses.

Starr whispered to Cheney and another accomplice, Wilson, who had joined them. "We're all set. The others are waitin' for our lead. This is it. Now! Let's go!"

The men raced to the buggy, snatched out their rifles and went plunging through the bank entrance. Simultaneously, their accomplices leaped into position on every corner of the square, their sixes out and roaring.

Instantly, the cry of "Holdup!" spread like wildfire through the square. The outlaws pitched lead at every man in sight, scattering groups in all directions. Un-

der the first shock of surprise, resistance among the townsmen dwindled, then as suddenly flamed up. The air throbbed with the crash of slugs, exploding off the bank wall. The citizens were retaliating. Their shots became more numerous, concentrated. The bank wall was pockmarked by a storm of bullets.

INSIDE the bank, Starr kept cool, ignored the battle sounds. He lined the six clerks and customers against a wall and calmly invited them to get proddy—if they were in a hurry to get their heads blown off. They were in no hurry. Paling, they showed no resistance.

Cheney and Wilson vaulted over the counter, seizing all the loot they could get while Starr guarded the clerks.

Outside, the citizens concentrated their fire upon the main bank entrance, defended by Link Cumplin. Ten bullets tore his body to tatters. Two heavy slugs shattered his left arm, rendering it useless. He kept firing one Colt with his right hand, sighting with one eye. The other had been shot out. Blood spurted from seven other wounds in his body and legs. Miraculously, he stayed on his feet, kept triggering his gun at every head his single eye could see.

Starr raced to his side, herding the six white-faced citizens ahead of him. Cheney and Wilson followed, packing the loot. The other three outlaws were beside them, had ducked into the bank at Starr's signal, ready for the final escape attempt.

"How many out there?" Starr snapped.

Bud Tyler said hoarsely, "About twenty. They're all over the place."

Starr was unperturbed. "They'll scatter when we charge. Shoot to kill! When I give the signal pile out after me and head for the horses!" He whirled to Link Cumplin. "Can you make it, Link?"

"Sure." Cumplin turned. His blood was squashing in his shoes as he shifted, but he grinned. "You ain't done till they throw rocks on your chest."

"Good enough. You're all man. I'll cover you all the way." Starr shoved the six citizens outside for camouflage. He shouted, "Let's go!"

They charged out, their guns jetting flame. Four citizens crumpled upon the streets under their fire. Unnerved, the remaining townsmen scattered. The outlaws reached the hitchrail in a body, vaulted into the saddle. Riding hell-bent, they blasted their way loose of a posse of hundreds, ran the fifteen mile gantlet and escaped with eleven thousand dollars in loot. Not one desperado had been lost. Link Cumplin eventually recovering from his wounds. The Bearcat had shown his claws.

Strangely enough, though Starr was a gun-wizard and ordered his men to shoot to kill, he differed from most outlaws in his own aversion for bloodshed. In his long, thirty-five year career of outlawry he killed only one man. This occurred in one of the most astonishing duels Western history records.

Tracked down by a bounty hunter named Floyd Wilson, Starr refused an ultimatum to surrender. The men had encountered each other on the prairie. Both dismounted and faced each other with drawn sixes.

Starr told the manhunter quietly, "Go away. No man can come at me with handcuffs and live, savvy?"

Wilson retorted, "Drop that gun and elevate!" He moved closer. "Do as I say or I'll kill you!"

Starr's jaw set. "It's your funeral," he said. "I'll drop my gun and you can fire first. That will make it self-defense if you die. But you better aim right! Miss, and I'll blast out the middle of your heart! Shoot!"

Wilson shot—and missed. Starr kept his promise. Wilson died at the instant reply of his six, drilled dead center.

It is said that it was Starr's reluctance to spill blood that caused his death on February 19, 1921. Raiding a bank at Harrison, Arkansas, he herded the two employees into a vault with their hands raised. A loaded gun had been prepared by one of the clerks on a shelf inside for such an emergency. Desperate at the apparent success of the robbery, the clerk seized it and fired, despite Starr's menacing six. Amazed, he watched the outlaw crumple without triggering his gun. Henry Starr had permitted an opponent to shoot first—once too often. A few minutes later he was dead. Killed by his own peculiar code.

And back in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a wizened undertaker read the newspaper headlines and moved to perform a service paid for years in advance.

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WESTERN ACES MAGAZINE

This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

Five years ago, a .45 frameup made an outcast of Vic Holt. And when he fogged back into Tumbleweed Valley to ride down that renegade rep, another double-cross deal stampeded him into a . . .

Killer's Crimson Corral

By

John A. Saxon

VIC HOLT was running a survey on a new water project eighteen miles from the railroad when he heard of his Uncle Jared's death. It was his first word from the valley in nearly five years.

He read the letter and then for a long time stared at the undulating heat waves that rolled over the desert reaches like waves on the surface of a restless sea. His lean face, burned by a thousand hot winds, was set in hard lines as he stared at the writing. Under heavy brows his steel blue eyes were moody and thoughtful. He felt that he should go back and yet he wasn't sure.

Five years. Surely the feeling against him must have died down by now.

In less than twenty minutes he had made up his mind, turned his crew over to an assistant, and was on his way to the railroad.

That night in the dusty, dimly lighted coach, he read the letter again. It was was from Jared's lawyer.

Your uncle died suddenly without making a will. Under the law, the Rocking H belongs to you. However, there are certain matters that require your presence—

Vic remembered Jared's last words the day he left the valley: "Everybody believes you were mixed up with the Kelley gang. The word is out that if you don't leave the valley voluntarily, you'll be run out."

Vic had asked just one question. "What do you believe, Uncle Jared?"

"I think you were with them when Joe Heaton was killed. I never want to see you again," the old man had answered bitterly.

He never had.

There was something ironic about the cold impartiality of the law that had brought to pass the very thing Jared Holt would never have had happened. The law, taking cognizance of neither love nor hate, had followed the rule of blood succession. Vic Holt was now the owner of one of the finest spreads in Tumbleweed Valley.

It wasn't because Vic wanted the Rocking H that he was on his way back. It was because he didn't. It should have gone to someone else, and he meant to see that it did.

"You owe it to Linda and Mary," Farley's letter said, "to see that Jared's estate is distributed not according to law—but according to common justice."

A strange analogy there. The law was supposed to administer justice. Yet the people of the valley had taken the law into their own hands and now they would expect Vic to deal out the justice which he had been denied.

He didn't care what they expected. He would do as his own conscience directed. Mary Davis, Jared's housekeeper for twenty years, was entitled to the property she had helped create. She had helped Jared out of many a tight. But for her, he would have given up the year of the drouth. She had used her own meager savings to help him pull through. She had ridden range for him when he didn't have money enough to hire riders. She had put up with his cantankerous disposition for years for the sake of Vic and her own daughter, Linda.

TWO days later Vic was in Farley's office. The lawyer's manner was none too friendly. He said, "Despite Jared's feeling toward you, which he carried to his grave, the court has held that he died intestate and that as his next of kin, you are his legal heir."

Vic knew what was in the lawyer's mind. "I didn't come here to claim the property," he said flatly. "I came to see that it goes where it belongs—to Mary Davis and her daughter."

"Of course if you don't want it—"

"I don't. Jared Holt would turn over in his grave if he thought I had it. He always intended it should go to them, but he held off too long. Draw up a deed and I'll sign it. The minute it is on file I'm leaving."

Farley shrugged, and then scribbled for a long time. He pushed the paper across the desk to Vic, pointed wordlessly to the line marked *grantor*.

As Vic picked up a pen to sign, he raised his eyes questioningly to Farley's. There was some kind of commotion out in the street in front of the lawyer's office.

"That's probably Tex Morrell and his outfit," the lawyer said a little uneasily. "As soon as he heard you were coming back he began making threats. He's been telling everybody that he intends to marry Linda and because of that—"

Vic didn't hear the rest of what Farley said. He felt as if someone had dragged an icicle over his spine. Tex was going to marry Linda! He couldn't believe it. He'd have to hear that from the lips of Linda herself.

He left the deed on the table without signing it, got up and walked out on the sidewalk.

It was Morrell all right; older, but still big, burly and blustering. Vic remembered that he had always thought Morrell's eyes were set too close together.

With Tex were half a dozen of his Flying M riders.

"There's the son," Morrell said, as he saw Vic. "There's the no-good who has come back after five years to rob a widow and her daughter of their just due."

Vic, flat-footed, his hands in his pockets, stared at Tex but said nothing.

"You're not wanted around here, Holt," Morrell went on. "We've decided if you're not out of town in fifteen minutes, we'll give you a taste of what you missed five years ago."

Vic continued to watch Morrell with a quizzical half-smile upon his lips that seemed to add fuel to Morrell's anger.

A tall, brown-haired girl dressed in a flannel shirt and levis, elbowed her way through. Vic knew Linda instantly, but the gangly, awkward girl he had left five years ago had blossomed into a beautiful young woman.

"You've no right to talk to Vic Holt that way, Tex," she exclaimed hotly. "I'm still capable of handling my own affairs, even though you don't seem to think so."

"Just a minute, Linda," Vic cut in, smiling slightly. She was still the hot-tempered little devil she had always been. "I'll handle this. Tex hasn't changed much. Still the loud-mouthed bully, swaggering around with a pearl-handle gun on his hip like some badman of the old days."

"I don't need a gun to handle you, Holt," Morrell said, his eyes narrowing as he unbuckled his belt and handed it to a bystander. "I just need my hands to take you apart."

Vic was still smiling. "I wonder," was all he said.

"Put up your fists," Morrell ordered.

"Why?"

"All right then—"

Morrell swung his right with force enough to fell an ox. Vic stepped back far enough to let the blow graze his chin. Then he took his hands out of his pockets.

The fight was over almost before it started. Morrell outweighed Vic twenty pounds, but Vic hadn't been working with tough construction crews as long as he had without learning how to handle his fists. He gave ground as Morrell followed up with his left. Then he stepped in quickly. His hard fist traveled less than a foot and cracked against Morrell's jaw with a sound that was like the crushing of thin wood.

Morrell went down to his knees, shook his head dazedly, then sprawled face down in the dust of the street. He didn't hear Vic's low whisper: "Never lead with your right, Mister. It's dangerous."

FOR a moment the crowd was too stunned by the rapidity of what had happened to do or say anything. Finally Slim Burton, Morrell's foreman, dragged Tex back to his feet, shook him to his senses. When Tex would have resumed the fight, Burton held him back.

Morrell's face twisted with rage. He had been whipped by one blow before the girl he had bragged he would marry. His prestige as a fighting man had suffered a setback that would take a long time to wipe out.

"I'll get you for that, Holt," he promised, wiping a trickle of blood from his mouth with the thumb of his right hand.

"You won't get anybody," Vic answered without raising his voice. "I came here on a friendly errand—to see that Mary Davis and Linda got what they were entitled to. Before you took the trouble to find out why I came, you tried to gang up on me. I'll leave when I get ready—but it will be longer than fifteen minutes. I'm staying to look into a few things that I think need looking into."

Buck Dennison, owner of the Circle D, shoved toward the front of the group. "This is none of my fight, Vic," he said, "but your presence in the valley will cause trouble and you know it. There's still a lot of feeling against you. If you intend to take over the Rocking H—"

"If it's none of your fight, Dennison," Vic shot back, "stay out of it."

Linda had reached Vic's side now and turned to face the others. "I don't see whose business it is what Vic does with the ranch," she said warmly. "And as for my own affairs, I'd appreciate it if they were left in my hands, without interference from anybody." She was looking straight at Tex Morrell.

"Linda," Vic said quietly, "if you've got a rig in town, let's go out and see Ma."

"The buckboard is over at the store," she answered.

They walked through the crowd without looking at any of the men directly, and proceeded across the street to the general store where a team was hitched at the rail.

There was a heavy-set, dark-skinned man leaning against the back wheel of the wagon as they approached. He seemed to have been watching the affair in front of the lawyer's office, but without any particular interest.

"Vic," Linda said, "this is Brad Jenkins. He's been with us three years."

The man looked Vic up and down coolly. Apparently satisfied with what he saw,

he shoved out a big fist and grasped Vic's hand.

"Heard a lot about you, Holt," he drawled in a deep voice. "All of it bad—except from Linda and Ma Davis. Howsomever, bein' a gent who makes up his own mind, I ain't choosin' to agree with what I've heard. Shake."

They shook.

"Brad's going to stay in town awhile," Linda said. "He can get one of our spare horses from the livery and come out later."

"Oh—sure," Jenkins answered, in a way that made Vic think his supposed idea of staying in town hadn't been any part of his plans up to now.

It wasn't until Linda and Vic were a couple of miles out of town that either of them referred to the argument with Morrell. There was a question in Vic's mind that was more important to him at the moment than any discussion of his recent trouble. He didn't know just how to approach it, so he took a roundabout course.

"I'm sorry about that mix-up with Tex, Linda," he said at last. "You understand, of course, that I didn't come back here to claim the ranch. That's rightfully yours and Mary's. I just wanted to be sure you got it. But I don't intend to be pushed around by anybody like Tex Morrell, even if he is the man—" He stopped lamely.

Linda smiled. "You heard about that quickly enough, didn't you? Tex has been doing a lot of talking—but don't you think I'm going to have the final say on that? A girl can't very well say she understands a man has threatened to marry her, can she? The man might say he hadn't done any such a thing—and then imagine her embarrassment."

Vic said, "Well, I couldn't imagine you married to Tex Morrell."

REINING in the team sharply, Vic pointed at two men half a mile from the road. "That's Dennison's land, isn't it? Those men look like surveyors. What are they doing?"

"They're supposed to be mining men," Linda answered. "Dennison thinks there's gold on his place. They've been working on the Circle D for weeks."

Vic didn't say anything for a moment. He knew there hadn't been any gold within two hundred miles of Tumblewood Valley within the memory of the oldest settler. And these men didn't look like mining men to him.

He decided that there were quite a few things he wanted to look into before he left the valley this time.

If Vic Holt had been her own son, Mary Davis couldn't have offered him a warmer welcome back to the ranch upon which he had been raised. She was full of questions.

"And what have you been doing all these years, Vic?" she demanded after supper that night, when she had seated herself comfortably in her favorite rocker. "Where have you been since—"

"Since I was told to leave the valley?" he finished for her, when she stopped in some embarrassment. "When I left here I got a job a long ways off. I worked nights and went to school; learned surveying, got a job with the Reclamation Service, and I'm still with them."

"You mustn't ask so many questions, Mother," Linda put in.

"I don't mind." Vic's voice was very even. "I want to ask a few myself. Before Uncle Jared died, did he ever tell you why he was so sure I was mixed up with the Kelley bunch?"

For a long time Mary Davis didn't respond. She rocked quietly, deep in thought.

"I was afraid you'd ask that, Vic," she said at last. "It's best to let bygones be bygones, but you're entitled to that question. The day before you went away Buck Dennison came over here to see your Uncle Jared. They talked a long time. What they said I don't know. Your uncle wasn't a man a body could question. When Buck left he handed Jared something wrapped in a newspaper. Jared looked at it and said: 'That settles it.' It was right after that—"

"What was in the package, Ma?"

"I never knew until after Jared died. Then I thought it best to say nothing about it." There was a long pause. "Linda, in the bottom drawer of Jared's bureau you'll find the package. Bring it downstairs."

Linda was back in two minutes. Her face seemed drawn. Vic figured she already knew what was in the bundle. She handed it to Vic. He knew what it was before he unwrapped it. A gun.

Attached to the trigger was a tag that read: *This is the gun that killed Joe Heaton.*

The gun was his own, purchased with his savings when he was fourteen years old!

"And Uncle Jared believed that?" Vic's voice was bitter.

Ma Davis nodded. "He must have, Vic. If I had known then—"

Vic wasn't thinking about what had happened five years ago at the moment. He was thinking about the fact that the man who had brought the gun to Jared was still in Tumbleweed Valley—still able to do some explaining.

In his expression Linda read something that seemed to frighten her.

"Vic," she exclaimed, "you're not going to stir this all up again, are you? Mother doesn't believe you had anything to do with Joe Heaton's death and neither do I. There wasn't any charge made publicly. It all happened five years ago and—"

He shook his head slowly. "That's not it, Linda. If they had this evidence, why didn't they produce it at the time and give me a chance? Why did they ride a seventeen-year-old kid out of the valley without a chance to defend himself? I can understand Uncle Jared's attitude. Perhaps he thought he was protecting me. But Dennison is going to explain to me where he got that gun and under what circumstances. There was some reason why things were hushed up at that time and I'm going to find out what that reason was."

He got up with the package in his hands and went up to his own room. In the yellow lamplight he examined the gun.

THE old .44 brought back a rush of memories. Vic Holt had, like most kids, been crazy about guns. At fourteen, he had felt that a .44 slapping at his thigh made him a man. He had become pretty proficient with it during his kid days. He learned al the fast draws, how to shoot from the hip; learned to snap the head off a rattler at fifty paces.

But it had all been a phase of his early youth. By the time he reached sixteen he had forgotten all about the .44. He hadn't even had a gun in his hands since he left the valley.

The day of the gunman was over. But there were men in Tumbleweed Valley who still carried guns. Men like Dennison and Tex Morrell. Old men, most of them, who still lived in the gun-flaming days of the early West. Even Jared Holt had carried a six-shooter as long as Vic could remember.

Vic took the shells out of the gun and wiped them. They were green with corrosion. One of them was an empty. He cleaned the gun carefully and oiled it. Then he put the shells back, wrapped the .44 again in the newspaper, turned out the light and went to bed.

But he didn't sleep. Somewhere in the crisscross pattern that confronted him there was a series of questions to which he must have the answer.

Why hadn't he been publicly accused of the killing of Heaton? Why had Dennison been willing to hush the matter up if Vic was forced to leave the valley? How had a gun Vic hadn't seen or used in two years been the kill weapon in Heaton's death—if it had? He remembered that raid the Wild Bunch had made on Heaton's place, but he hadn't been one of them. Who had carried his gun? Why were Tex Morrell and Dennison too, for that matter, so damned anxious for him to stay out of the valley and why would Dennison hire surveyors to look for gold in a country where there never had been any within the memory of man?

There were answers to all of those questions somewhere, and the starting point seemed to be with Buck Dennison. He wondered if the ending point might not be the same.

After a long time he fell asleep . . . .

It was three days before Vic Holt did anything about it. It seemed good to be on the ranch again enjoying Ma's fine cooking; Linda's shy interest; the green of the hills after the dryness of the desert country. He picked himself a horse from the remuda, found the old saddle he had used as a boy.

One afternoon he took the .44, still wrapped in newspaper, slid it under his arm and saddled his horse.

Brad Jenkins was in the corral when he went down. He said: "Hi, Vic. Goin' some place?"

Vic had an idea. Brad knew what was in the bundle.

"Goin' to town with a six-gun under your arm?" Brad asked when Vic didn't answer.

Vic noticed that there was a gun on Brad's hip and wondered.

"I'm goin' to town myself," Brad continued.

Brad's gun was an old one in a very

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worn leather holster that had tie thongs at the lower end. Usually a man didn't wear a gun these days unless it was for a specific purpose. Then he understood. Brad Jenkins was offering to side him if any trouble developed. Without a definite offer, Vic couldn't very well say no.

"I'll ride in with you," Brad said slowly. "Just thought I'd like to look around. I won't be very far away—when you get ready to come back."

They rode off together.

If Vic expected to find Dennison in town, he was disappointed. He left Brad at the store and made the rounds of the various saloons. He found the Golden Dollar, the Double Diamond and Trail's End not much different from what they had been in years past.

It was when he slid through the swinging doors at the Trail's End, the newspaper-wrapped gun still under his arm, that he saw Tex Morrell. He felt that it meant trouble and would have gone out again, but for the fact he realized Tex had seen him and might think Vic was backing water.

MORRELL was sitting at a table in the back of the room talking with a man who wore a corduroy coat with flap pockets, high field boots and a stiff-brimmed Stetson pinched four ways. Vic was pretty sure he was one of the men he had seen on Dennison's place.

He was sure of it a minute later when the man took a leather-covered notebook from his pocket, pointed out something to Morrell, who took the book and put it in his pocket. The other man left, leaving Morrell alone at the table.

Vic ordered a beer. He wanted no further trouble with Morrell, and it was his intention to leave the saloon as soon as he had finished his drink.

Morrell seemed to have other ideas. He got up, walked slowly to the bar and stood beside Vic, staring at Vic's now empty glass. Then he spoke to the bartender.

"Fill it up," he ordered, indicating Vic's glass, "and give me the same. I'm buying you a drink, Holt." His voice might have been considered friendly, but for the fact his eyes were mere burning slits.

"Nice of you," Vic answered, and couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his tone.

"I'm willing to call it quits," Morrell said. "In fact, I'm willing to buy the

Rocking H at a fair price, providing you—"

"Providing I get out of the valley," Vic said tightly. "That it?"

"I didn't say so," Morrell answered, trying to hold in his temper.

"The ranch is not for sale," Vic said.

The .44, in its wrapping, was on the bar at his elbow. He saw Morrell's eyes rest on it for an instant.

Then, reflected in the mirror, he saw one of Morrell's riders move toward the door. There were at least six Flying M men in the place.

Vic knew that it was a trap, one that hadn't been planned but had been quickly put into execution the minute he came into the place. He was sure of it when Morrell suddenly reached over and jerked the paper off the gun. All pretended friendliness was gone now.

"So that's it, you damned crook," he almost shouted. "Carrying a gun around wrapped in a newspaper. Lucky I spotted it before you had a chance to use it or I might have been shot in the back—like Joe Heaton was!"

How did Tex Morrell know that?

Vic's action was instantaneous. He picked up the glass of beer and flung it in Morrell's face. At the same time, he grabbed the .44 on the bar and shoved Morrell hard with his left hand.

Morrell, trying to shake the liquor out of his eyes, dislodged the leather-bound notebook from his breast pocket and it fell on the floor. Vic was curious about that book. He ducked under Morrell's arm, picked up the book in his left hand, reversed his position and came up behind Morrell with the .44 leveled.

The Flying M men were moving in. They didn't move far. Brad Jenkins kicked open the batwing doors, shoved the door guard aside and said:

"Easy does it, gents." The deep timbre of his voice was sufficient to cause half a dozen Flying M men who were reaching for their guns, to change their minds on the instant.

The Morrell outfit was in a cross fire with Jenkins at the front of the saloon and Vic, walking slowly backwards to the rear, the .44 moving from side to side.

"There's a window behind you, Vic," Jenkins said. "Get out that way and I'll cover you. If you want Buck Dennison, he's at Ten Mile Line Camp—alone. I'll

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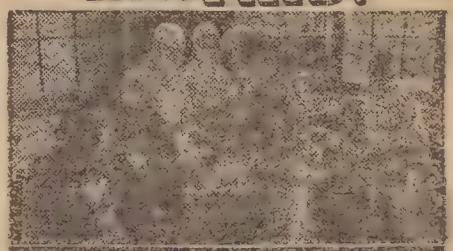

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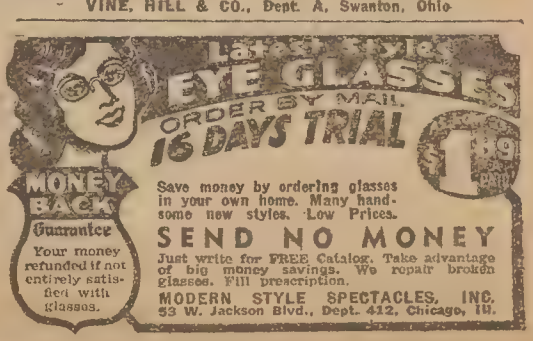

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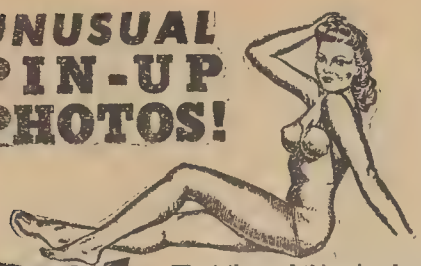

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keep these gents interested until you get a good start."

Vic got the window open and slid over the sill. He got his horse and headed north. When he was sure he had a sufficient lead on Morrell's men he stopped his horse for a blow. He wanted to look at that notebook. He thumbed through it for several minutes.

"So that's it," he said to himself.

AS AN ENGINEER Vic read into those figures and hieroglyphics an entirely different reason for the surveying activities. It wasn't gold Dennison was looking for—it was something else. Vic shoved the notebook back into his pocket and went on toward Ten Mile Line Camp.

Darkness settled quickly and with it came rain. Thunder rumbled in the mountains and vivid lightning speared the sky. By the time Vic reached Ten Mile Line Camp the night was as black as the inside of a tar barrel. The rain was driving in sheets. As Vic neared the camp he could see a flickering light in the cabin.

This was going to be a showdown with Dennison, and Vic knew it. He understood now why they had wanted him out of the valley in the first place. Buck Dennison had planned long and carefully. Morrell was in it too, but probably playing his own game against Dennison.

Vic dismounted fifty yards from the cabin, reached for his gun and swore. Having no belt or holster, he had put the .44 in his waistband. Somewhere it had slipped out.

He had gone too far now to back out. He made his way carefully to the window and looked in. What he saw gave him the surprise of his life.

Buck Dennison was there all right, but he was not alone. The man with him was Brad Jenkins!

Vic was astounded. He had left Brad at the Trail's End Saloon and Brad had promised to hold the Flying M men there until Vic had a head start so that Morrell couldn't follow him. Yet here was Brad, at Ten Mile Line Camp ahead of him.

There was only one way Brad Jenkins could have made it in less time than Vic, and the realization of that caused Vic a quick intake of breath because of the implication that followed. For years the old-timers had talked about a secret trail

through the mountains that led from town to the upper valley by a short cut. It was supposed that the Kelley bunch had discovered it and used it in their sudden moves throughout the valley. If Brad Jenkins knew of that trail, then—

Despite the roar of the storm, Vic could hear the conversation inside the cabin. Brad and Dennison were having hot words.

"You thought you had everything sewed up, didn't you, Buck?" Brad was saying. "You expected Morrell to meet you here for the final checkup on what to do about the Holt outfit. You're going to have a long wait, Buck—Morrell is dead."

Dennison stared at Jenkins as though inclined to disbelieve him.

"If he's dead," he said finally, "you killed him. I've been suspicious of you for a long time, Jenkins."

Jenkins nodded, almost pleasantly.

"I thought you were beginning to wonder," he said. "That's why when the chance came today, I got Morrell. You're next. Morrell tried to gang up on Vic Holt. I lent him a hand, but he didn't need it. Then I started him out here. I wanted to be sure this time they couldn't claim Vic Holt did the killing like they did the last time.

"I knew when I told Holt you were up here, Morrell would bust a cinch strap trying to get here before he did. That was what I wanted. When he made a break for it, I killed him. Then I used the old outlaw trail to get here before Vic Holt. I was afraid he might kill you, Dennison, and I wanted that pleasure myself."

"Why—are you—doing this?"

"Haven't you figured it out yet? My name wasn't always Jenkins, Dennison. Once it was Heaton. I was always a wild one. The night my father was shot I came in off the owlhoot just after you and Morrell left. He lived long enough to tell me who killed him—with Vic Holt's gun. I've waited three years to get you, Dennison."

Dennison was like a trapped animal.

"But why should I—"

"Why should you try and hang the killing on young Vic Holt? Because you knew, and Morrell knew, that Jared Holt was an old man. You couldn't get his property while he was alive, and when

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he was dead you knew you'd have to face either Vic Holt, or two women. So you stole young Holt's gun to kill my father, and used that as a lever to run the kid out of the valley. Holt lived longer than you thought he would. If Morrell could have married Linda Davis, he'd have had a hold on the land that would have forced you to deal with him to get the Holt spread."

"You're crazy," Dennison shouted. "Why should I want the Rocking H?"

"Maybe it had something to do with the gold you were trying to locate on your land."

VIC knew that it wasn't gold Dennison was after. The field book in his pocket showed the men had been locating dolomite, the basic metal of magnesium—and the deposit was on the Rocking H!

Vic worked his way toward the door. He knew that Jenkins intended to kill Dennison, and while he felt the latter deserved killing, he couldn't stand by and witness a murder.

Kicking the door open, Vic went inside. Both men glanced at the door, and both semed to have the same mental reaction, that the interruption would divert the attention of the other. Both of them reached for their guns at the same instant.

Vic picked up a small stool and threw it. Dennison hit it with his left arm, still trying to draw his gun with his right hand. The stool, deflected in flight, hit the lamp and put it out. In the immediate darkness that followed Vic saw two flashes of gunfire. Then he heard the slumping sound of a body.

Which man had been hit?

Vic had no gun. He knew if Dennison was still on his feet he would kill him because he would know he had heard what Jenkins said. If Jenkins was still alive—

Outside, the lightning flared fitfully but not brilliantly enough to illumine the inside of the shack. When it did, Vic dropped to the floor silently and spread himself out flat. A distant flash of lightning, brighter than before, silhouetted a form to Vic's straining eyes. Dennison!

A .45 roared and a slug tore into the wall near the spot where Vic had been standing. Catlike he moved another foot, crawling flat on his stomach. Jenkins was

down. Vic's fingers touched something warm and sticky—blood. Jenkins' blood, and it would lead him to Brad!

For a long moment Vic held his breath, praying that there wouldn't be another flash of lightning until he could reach Jenkins' gun.

Inch by inch he crept along the floor, following the trail of blood with his outstretched fingers. Finally he touched the body. Then he found the gun, still in Brad Jenkins' fingers. Stealthily he got up on his feet, trusting to the rumbling thunder to cover any sound he made. One shot—that was all he would get. One shot—with the next flash of lightning.

Finally it came, a blinding, searing stab of blue-white light that illumined the interior of the cabin like the quick flare of a revolving searchlight. In that split second of dazzling brightness both men saw each other—and fired.

In the abysmal darkness that followed the lightning's flash, Vic heard a scratchy groping sound, then a soft thump. He risked a match. Both men were dead. He flung the gun from his hand and ran out into the night. . . .

The next morning Vic saddled up and announced to Mary and Linda that he was going into town again. Ma Davis remarked upon the fact that Brad Jenkins had apparently decided to make a night of it in town and had not returned. Vic didn't tell her that Jenkins would never return.

He knew his duty was to make a report to the sheriff and he had to go to town to do it.

When he reached the sheriff's office, he dismounted and went inside.

"Howdy, Vic," the sheriff greeted him. "What brings you into town again?"

"I want to talk to you about Brad Jenkins, Tex Morrell and Buck Dennison."

The sheriff raised his eyebrows. "What makes you think you can tell me anything about 'em I don't already know? Brad Jenkins was Joe Heaton's boy. He killed Tex Morrell here in town yesterday, then went out to Dennison's Ten Mile Camp. There must have been a hell of a ruckus. They shot each other."

"Each one of them gunning for the other—"

"Sure was. Jenkins killed Tex Morrell after you left the Trail's End yesterday. Tex tried to make a break. I figure Brad

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had it all figured out because he had a note all written out that he left for me. Said Morrell and Dennison had killed his father. If he got Buck he wanted me to know he did it, and if he didn't get Buck, he wanted me to know who it was that killed his dad. It's a darned good thing you didn't go up there after Jenkins told you where Dennison was. You might have been right in the middle of it."

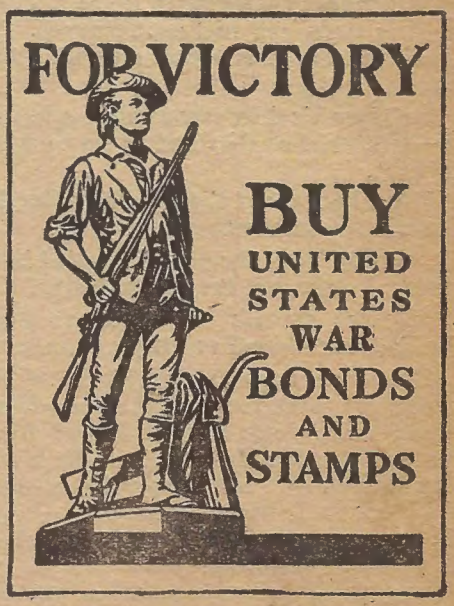
"But I—"

"I said it was a darned good thing you didn't go up there," the sheriff repeated grimly.

Vic knew that once the old sheriff used that tone there was no use talking any more.

"There's been a lot of talk around the valley for a long time, Vic. It ain't such a bad place though, and I got the feelin' that folks around here are goin' to look at things differently as far as you are concerned from now on." He tamped his pipe with the forefinger of his right hand and held a match to the tobacco. "Besides, Linda Davis is a darned nice gal, and the Rocking H is one of the purtiest spreads in the whole valley."

Vic knew what he meant. He thought so, too.



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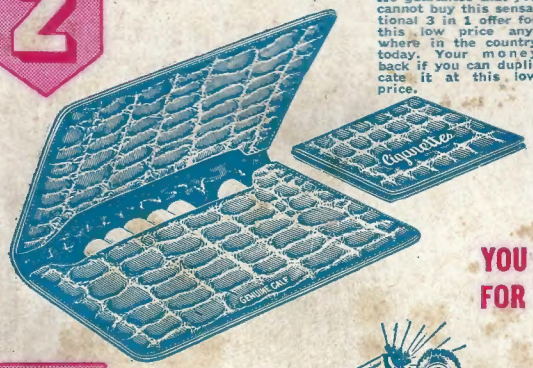

$1.50 Value Smart Alligator Grain Matching Calfskin Cigarette Case

The handsome Cigarette Case is a fitting companion piece to the Billfold described above. It's made from the same smart Alligator Grain Calfskin and is made to hold a full package of TWENTY CIGARETTES. Each Cigarette Case is reinforced with a hidden metal reinforcement that holds the case in shape and prevents your cigarettes from bending or breaking. The case fits neatly into your vest pocket or breast pocket without bulging.

Guarantee

We guarantee that you cannot buy this sensational 3 in 1 offer for this low price anywhere in the country today. Your money back if you can duplicate it at this low price.

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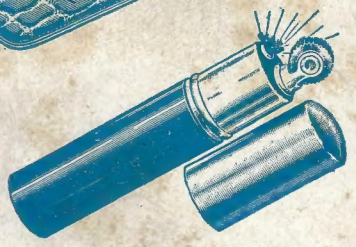

50c Value Famous CIGAR LIGHTER

Cigarette Lighters have been plenty scarce. Virtually none have been manufactured for several years now and we feel fortunate in offering you the famous-prewar type, all metal FLAMEMASTER lighter in a beautiful matched two-tone finish. Measuring only 2⅝ inches in length, this "fool-proof" lighter works unfailingly. Just a few drops of fluid and your lighter is ready for months of carefree, unfailing service.

YOU GET $4.00 WORTH OF QUALITY MERCHANDISE FOR THE AMAZING LOW PRICE OF ONLY $1.98

Men everywhere ask us how we can make this sensational 3 in 1 offer for such a low price! Tremendous buying power is the answer. More than 1,000,000 satisfied customers have bought and are using our Billfolds. Don't be misled by the low price! We guarantee this to be $4.00 value or we want you to return the Billfold, Cigarette Case and Cigarette Lighter and **get your money back in full.** You are to be the sole judge. If this sounds to you like a fair, honest-to-goodness, man to man offer—and we're sure you'll agree it does—then fill out the coupon below and rush it to us. We'll ship your smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold, the matching Cigarette Case, and the FLAMEMASTER Lighter, all for $1.98 plus a few cents COD Charges.

HERE'S A USEFUL BEAUTIFUL GIFT THAT WILL GLADDEN THE HEART OF THAT BOY IN SERVICE!

Ask any service man what gifts are most appreciated and you'll find that a Billfold, Cigarette Case and a Lighter are high on the list of most wanted and most useful articles. Imagine how pleased any boy would be to receive all three at one time in a matching set such as this. A gift to last for years and one he'll remember always.

SEND NO MONEY—RUSH THIS COUPON!

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART, Dept. 3203
500 N. Dearborn St., Chicago 10, Ill.

Gentlemen: Please rush me the complete set of smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold, the matching Cigarette Case and the FLAMEMASTER Lighter COD for only $1.98 plus 15c Federal Tax on Billfold only and few cents postage. I must be more than pleased or I will return in 10 days for full refund.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY & ZONE ..... STATE .....

☐ I enclose $1.98 plus 15c tax with my order to save all shipping charges. Ship the 3 articles to me all postage charges prepaid.